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ROKKA:

Braves of the Six Flowers

ISHIO YAMAGATA

ILLUSTRATION BY MIYAGI



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ROKKA: Braves of the Six Flowers

5

Illustration / MIYAGI



Saint of the Single Flower





I'm not the kind of guy who can just abandon
one of my own when they need me.

That's why I've decided to help you.

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MIYAGI



NEW YORK

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Rokka: Braves of the Six Flowers, Vol. 5

Ishio Yamagata

Translation by Jennifer Ward

Cover art by Miyagi

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Adlet



Fremy

Rolonia



Mora



Nashetania



Goldof



Chamo



Hans



◆ THE EVENTS THUS FAR ◆

When the Evil God awakened from the depths of darkness, the Spirit of Fate chose six Braves and bestowed upon them the power to save humanity. The self-proclaimed "strongest man in the world," a boy named Adlet, was chosen as one of these Braves of the Six Flowers and headed out to battle to prevent the resurrection of the Evil God.

But when the Braves gathered to meet at the designated location, they found that, for some reason, there were seven of them. The Braves, realizing that one among them was the enemy, fell prey to suspicion and paranoia. However, with Adlet's leadership, their wits, and the powers of the Saints in their party, they've slowly but surely cracked open these mysteries.

Now that the fiend commander Tgurneu's scheme, a hieroform called the Black Barrenbloom, threatens the Braves of the Six Flowers, what new truths will come to light...?



Illustration: Miyagi

Prologue

While
Awaiting the
Barrenbloom

Prologue

While Awaiting the Barrenbloom

Deep underground were two fiends. They occupied a small space: about fifteen square feet of bare earth. In the center of this space was a table and a chair. One fiend was atop the crude table; the other sat in the chair, legs crossed.

It was the twenty-third day since the Evil God's awakening, and aboveground, night would be breaking into faint dawn around this time.

The fig on the table split open to create a tiny mouth. "It's almost time. Just a little longer, and Fremy will come back to me," said Tgurneu in a high-pitched voice.

Listening to Tgurneu was a bipedal, three-winged lizard-fiend with no name. Tgurneu usually used it for a body.

Not long earlier, a messenger fiend had come to inform them that the Phantasmal Barrier, where the Braves of the Six Flowers had been trapped, was now deactivated. The messenger had also confirmed that the Six Braves had been attacking Nashetania before she escaped by herself. Then another Brave had shown up, and all seven crest bearers had gathered without any further hiccups—just as Tgurneu had expected.

"That's a relief," said Tgurneu. "My plan was nearly ruined. I never would have thought someone else would beat me to the punch."

"It had to have been Dozzu's faction."

"Of course. Cargikk doesn't have the brains to concoct a scheme like that. But I do wonder where Dozzu got that fake crest. How curious." Tgurneu chuckled. "Well, whatever. In any case, they've weathered the storm. Right now, let's just be glad we'll have the joy of seeing Fremy again."

The three-winged fiend asked quietly, "Äre you looking forward to it, Cómmander Tgurneu?"

"Yes, I'd like to see her soon. I want to meet her and see her face. I wonder

how she'll look at me after six months gone? You know how eagerly I've anticipated this." Tgurneu seemed excited. So unable to contain its enthusiasm, it began to ramble to no one in particular. "I love human faces. I love observing them. The face is the greatest organ of the human body. It's more thrilling to me than any tale, and more rich with implications than any philosophical tome.

"But smiles are boring. Peacefulness is worthless. When humans are in gripped by pain, sadness, or anxiety, *that* is beauty. That's the real reflection of the human soul. My heart finds it so fulfilling." The vines that grew from Tgurneu's body moved restlessly. "I want to see human faces. I want to see with my own eyes their most supreme despair and their basest suffering. Compared to those emotions, the revival of the Evil God is pointless and inconsequential," said Tgurneu, wiggling its offshoots like shoulders shrugging. "Whoops, shouldn't have said that. Keep that a secret from the other fiends."

The three-winged fiend didn't even have to nod. Tgurneu had been using the fiend's body as its own for many years. This creature knew what went on inside Tgurneu's mind better than anyone.

Tgurneu was not at all loyal to the Evil God. It fought only for its own enjoyment and lived to hurt all other creatures, human and fiend, and to watch their reactions as it did so. This was strictly kept secret from its subordinates, who believed in their leader.

"Fremy has shown me such wonderful expressions. I'm sure that my whole life, I'll never forget that look on her face when I brought judgment down on her. She couldn't restrain her despair when she discovered her loving family actually thought of her as a mere pawn.

"And I have high hopes for her. She's sure to show me even more wonderful expressions. The Battle of the Six Braves that begins now will drive her further into despair."

Even the three-winged fiend thought that Tgurneu was getting a little too excited—and giving advice was part of its job. "You shouldn't be preoccupied entirely with Frëmy. Don't förget that victory is our goal, Cómmander."

"Of course. Yes, I can't forget about that. If we lose, it's all over."

Once Tgurneu had killed the Braves of the Six Flowers and subdued Dozzu and

Cargikk, there would be no one left to impede its goal. After that, the world would be Tgurneu's.

The fiend planned to take control of the Evil God. This wasn't an impossible goal, if it could remove all obstacles that prevented this. All the fiends would become its tools, and humanity would live in continuous despair and suffering, purely for its enjoyment. Whether or not that future would come to pass was hanging on the fate of the Black Barrenbloom, and on the shoulders of Tgurneu's seventh.

However, they wouldn't be moving into action quite yet. First was Mora Chester. Tgurneu would set her up as the seventh and have her die—everything was already in place for that. The three-winged fiend was about to bring it up when Tgurneu said, "So how to kill Fremy? That's a very difficult question. I have various options: I could kill her with my own hands or let the Six Braves kill her. I wonder which would bring her the most despair." It seemed Tgurneu's mind was still fixated on Fremy.

"I'm sure she'll show me a wonderful expression, no matter how I kill her. But there's something else I'd look forward to even more: I'm thinking I'll make her kill herself. I'm sure that would give her the loveliest look on her face as she dies. I'd like to back her into a miserable corner where she has no choice but to die," Tgurneu said, smiling. "Of course, I don't know how the fight with the Braves will unfold. But I think it'll be quite possible to make Fremy kill herself. Or actually..." The gaping hole of Tgurneu's mouth twisted into a disgusting smile. "The seventh will push Fremy to her death for me."

Night would be dawning aboveground. The seventh and the Braves of the Six Flowers still had yet to arrive. It seemed it would be a little longer before the battle between Tgurneu and the heroes of humanity would begin.

Chapter 1

Saints and
Hieroglyphs

Chapter 1

Saints and Hieroglyphs

While running through the forest, Adlet had a sudden thought.

Why is Fremy so important to me?

It was the eighteenth day since the Evil God's awakening, and the sun had already begun to set. Adlet was running through the forest that covered the central-northern region of the Howling Vilelands. Behind him were Hans, Goldof, Rolonia, and Fremy. They were headed for an area called the Fainting Mountains. Dozzu and Nashetania had told them the place would hold important clues that could turn the tides of their battle.

In those mountains was a temple in worship of the Spirit of Fate, constructed by Tgurneu in the utmost secrecy. They had heard that there, Tgurneu had created a secret weapon called the Black Barrenbloom to kill the Braves of the Six Flowers. The Braves's current goal was to ascertain if that information was true and, if the Black Barrenbloom really did exist, to uncover its true nature.

About half an hour earlier, the party had slain specialist number nine, the fiend blocking the road to the temple. Mora, Chamo, Dozzu, and Nashetania were beyond the forest already, waiting for the rest of them.

Lying here and there around the forest were the bodies of the Dead Host. Some were former residents of Adlet's home village. But he didn't have the time to hold memorials for them or to mourn their deaths.

"Adlet, you're veering off course," Fremy called to him from behind, but he didn't react and just kept running straight forward. "Adlet," she called a second time, and he finally snapped out of it. "Are you listening? I just said you're veering off course."

He compared his mental map to the terrain and realized he was a little off the route toward their meeting point. He altered his course and continued running.

"What's wrong? You're acting weird," said Fremy.

Adlet shook his head a little to tell her it was nothing.

She was right—he wasn't calm. Not long earlier, all the people from his village had died, including his friend Rainer. On the nightmarish day the people of Adlet's village were abducted, Rainer had saved his life. Adlet had been timid as a child, and he had admired Rainer. Even after Rainer had been transformed into one of the Dead Host, he had continued to survive, fighting to pass on information to the Braves of the Six Flowers.

That friend had died in Adlet's arms. If he had only been a little faster, he might have been able to save him.

"Fremy, please just leave him be right now. He's had a painful experience," said Rolonia.

Goldof cut in. "More importantly...explain...what happened."

"*Meow*," replied Hans. "Once we've met up with Mora and the others."

But Adlet was troubled by more than just his friend's death. The information Rainer had passed along was torturing him. The last thing Rainer had told them was the identity of the Black Barrenbloom, the hieroform Tgurneu had created. *"The Black Barrenbloom is a hieroform in the shape of a human. A girl with white hair and a horn on her forehead. A girl with frighteningly cold eyes."*

Adlet knew only one girl who fit that description.

It wasn't necessarily established that Rainer's information was correct, and neither was there any proof that the person Rainer had described was Fremy. There could be another girl with cold eyes and a horn on her forehead. But there was no way Rainer could have been lying, and considering the situation, Adlet couldn't imagine that the Black Barrenbloom could be anyone else but Fremy.

If she was the Black Barrenbloom, and they had to kill her in order to save the world...then Adlet would have to do it. He was a Brave of the Six Flowers. The fate of the world rested on his shoulders. But that was too agonizing for him to bear—painful enough to rip him apart. He'd rather abandon his destiny to save the world than let Fremy die.

If he had been the Black Barrenbloom, he wouldn't have hesitated to kill himself for everyone's sake. If any other ally had been the Black Barrenbloom,

he would've been distressed, for sure, yet it wouldn't have hurt this much. But it was different with Fremy. She had been special to him ever since they'd first met.

Thinking about it, he didn't have many pleasant memories with her. She'd saved his life, but she'd also taken aim at him more than a few times. When he had expressed his attraction to her, she had treated him coldly. When he worried about her, she'd rejected him in irritation. More than once, she'd told him flat-out that she hated him.

He wouldn't say it like Hans, but there were other women out there. Rolonia was a friend. It wasn't like Adlet hadn't gotten to know any women during his training or on his travels. But he couldn't compare them to Fremy.

Adlet prayed in his heart that she would not be the Black Barrenbloom, but his gut was telling him that his wish would not come true.

"Meow , they're gettin' started straight outta the gate," said Hans. They could hear the fiends screeching just beyond the forest. A fight had broken out where they were supposed to meet Mora's party.

The road leading to the temple had been blocked by specialist number nine's Dead Host. But now, since that particular threat was gone, the fiends in the area must have gathered to stop the Braves, as well as Dozzu and Nashetania. The bulk of the military forces under Tgurneu's command were unquestionably coming their way, too. Adlet expected those forces would arrive late into the night, but he wasn't sure what would happen. It was clear that if the Braves dawdled, they'd be surrounded and killed.

They had to hurry. They couldn't ever stop moving, no matter what lay ahead.

"It looks like we'll be fighting all night," Fremy said, drawing her gun. She blasted the head of a fiend that caught her eye. Hans and Goldof both drew their weapons as well and went to help Mora's group.

The nine of them defeated the fifteen-odd fiends in the blink of an eye and immediately set off running again. There was no time to celebrate the safety of their comrades.

"You were late. What were you doing?" Mora asked as they ran. They were

supposed to have met up immediately after specialist number nine's defeat.

"Obviously, that moo-head was being a drag. Chamo's gonna give you a whacking, Rolonia. Come over here," complained Chamo. Rolonia yelped; Fremy, Goldof, Dozzu, and Nashetania all shot them questioning looks.

I guess I've got to explain, thought Adlet. But that was exactly what had been troubling him. Should he tell the others what Rainer had said? He really wanted to avoid hiding information as much as possible. It would invite unnecessary confusion and make the Braves suspicious of one another. But if he did tell the others, they might even kill Fremy on the spot.

While Adlet was busy deliberating, Hans abruptly cut in. "*Meow-hee-hee-hee-hee!* It was a real shock! Adlet suddenly threw his arms 'round Fremy, *meeeow!*"

"Huh?" Mora made an uncharacteristically foolish-sounding reply.

"And then he tried to drag her behind some nearby bushes! Rolonia and me tried to stop 'im, but he wasn't listenin' to us. He even started strippin' down! I was so appalled, I couldn't say a peep."

"Hey," said Adlet. "Stop making stuff up."

Mora's mouth hung open, aghast. Fremy shot Hans an irritated glare.

"Huh? Why would he take off his clothes? Was he hurt?" Only Chamo seemed puzzled by the conversation.

"Could we please have a serious discussion?" said Dozzu.

Hans shrugged and then glanced over at Adlet as if to say *You talk*.

Adlet understood what Hans was up to—he meant to hide the information and see how Fremy would act. Adlet was thinking the same thing.

There was one other problem, beyond the question of whether Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom or not: How much did Fremy herself know? Was she herself unaware that she was the Black Barrenbloom? Or was she hiding what she really was? If Fremy knew and was keeping the truth from them, then she was entirely their enemy.

But if she didn't, the situation was different. That would mean Tgurneu was

using her, that it had induced her to accompany the Braves of the Six Flowers without alerting her to her true identity. If so, then Fremy would help them stop the Black Barrenbloom.

Adlet would hide part of the information for the time being, and then he'd probe for a reaction from Fremy. He'd mustered his resolve. "Yeah, I'll tell you what happened." As they ran, Adlet told the others what had occurred in the forest, casually observing Fremy's expression the entire time.

Adlet briefly explained that one among the Dead Host had been alive and aware of the Black Barrenbloom, and the survivor had been his friend. He also told them about the function of Tgurneu's weapon as it had been detailed to him.

But there was just one thing Adlet didn't tell the others: Rainer's final revelation that the Black Barrenbloom was a hieroform in the shape of a human girl with white hair and a horn on her forehead.

"Rainer...that man in the Dead Host...was trying to tell us something else, but he couldn't talk anymore. Rolonia was doing everything she could to heal him, too. But..." Adlet trailed off and shook his head. Still running, the others fell silent.

"I wish I could tell you not to be disheartened...but I can't. It must be painful for you, Adlet, but please, bear with it," Mora consoled him.

"I'll express my respect for that brave young man," Nashetania said. The allies stopped, and Nashetania put her hand to her chest. Goldof followed suit. Dozzu stood on its hind legs and lifted a front paw lightly to give its condolences. Chamo was looking down with the expression of one who didn't know what to say.

Fremy was looking at Adlet as if there was something on her mind.

"What is it, Fremy?" he asked.

"...I'm sorry. I wasn't taught what you should say when someone dies."

"Oh. Don't worry about it," Adlet said, watching her expression. Was she concerned for him or was she thinking about something else? He couldn't tell.

Hans was watching Fremy, too, out of the corner of his eye. Had he managed to pick up on anything?

“Anyway,” said Adlet, “what’s important is the Barrenbloom. We have to make the best of the information Rainer gave us, or he won’t be able to rest in peace.”

The others nodded in response, and they took off again.

“To steal the power of fate... Is it even possible for such a hieroform to exist? I can’t believe it,” said Mora, face pale.

Adlet asked her, “What makes it so hard to believe?”

“Two things. First, I’ve never heard of any method to steal power from a hieroform. The only person who can control the power of a Spirit is the one who acts as a vessel for it. You might lend someone your power by creating a hieroform, but to steal a Saint’s powers...”

“It must be possible—for Tgurneu,” Dozzu said, cutting off Mora’s explanation. The fiend commander’s tone didn’t suggest the claim was an unconfirmed prediction. Dozzu seemed certain that Tgurneu had succeeded.

“How can you tell? How can you know?” prodded Adlet. Dozzu clearly knew more than Mora, master of the techniques of Saints at All Heavens Temple.

“It’s because of Hayuha,” Dozzu replied. “That’s all I can tell you right now.”

That’s strange, thought Adlet. It was true that Dozzu had been able to investigate the events of the past with Hayuha’s help. But what they’d been investigating was the true nature of the Evil God. So how did it know about the powers of Saints, too? Besides, the Saint of the Single Flower had told all she knew to the elder of All Heavens Temple. Even if Dozzu had seen the past, it wouldn’t have learned anything that Mora didn’t already know. Did this mean that the Saint of the Single Flower hadn’t told All Heavens Temple everything? And if so, then why?

But the issue at hand right then was the Black Barrenbloom and Fremy.

“Adlet, Rolonia, Hans, was that all this man from the Dead Host told you?” asked Dozzu.

“Yeah, that’s all.”

“But what is the Black Barrenbloom made of? That’s the most important thing. Is it in the form of a gem? A book inscribed with hieroglyphs? A barrier? A crest? A flower...?” Dozzu speculated.

“Rainer must have died before he could tell us.”

“Frustrating. I should have trusted what Rolonia told us before. This was a failure on my part—I was present as well.”

“This wasn’t your screwup. I didn’t believe most of what Rolonia was saying, either,” said Adlet. Dozzu didn’t seem suspicious of him. Apparently, they hadn’t realized he was hiding something.

“Can we be sure of that information?” asked Fremy.

Hans replied, “At the very least, I seriously doubt this was just some bluff of Tgurneu’s. We only found that feller ’cause of a series of coincidences. If it was a bluff, Tgurneu would’ve left the informewtion somewhere easier to find.”

Rolonia added, “P-plus, um, he didn’t seem like...the kind of person who would side with Tgurneu.”

Her tone indifferent, Fremy replied, “But there is the possibility that his information was mistaken to begin with. Tgurneu has lied to me and other fiends to hide what it’s really thinking. Tgurneu may have deceived your man from the Dead Host.”

“Meowbe so,” said Hans. Adlet was also taking that possibility into account.

“How did the man learn all this?” Fremy asked. “He didn’t tell you, did he?”

“*Meow* , he croaked before he could. If we’d found ’im a bit earlier, we’d have made it in time, though.”

“...This is so frustrating, seriously.” Fremy seemed to be considering something. From the look on her face, she appeared sincerely disappointed that they hadn’t gotten ahold of that intelligence. She wasn’t very expressive, but she couldn’t completely hide her feelings all the time.

“But we can’t do anything with this information alone. We must go to the Temple of Fate, after all,” said Dozzu.

“Of course. Let’s hurry,” said Fremy.

She wasn’t acting strangely at all. She just seemed desperate to gather whatever shreds of intel they could find about the Black Barrenbloom.

“Why’re you just standing there, Auntie?” Chamo said suddenly.

Mora had been probing the area with her power of clairvoyance, and she seemed confused.

“You can use a technique to search for hieroforms, can’t you, Auntie?” asked Chamo. “Use that to find the Black Barrenbloom.”

“O-oh, yes. Pardon me.”

“Don’t go senile on me. Come on.”

Flustered, Mora intoned the holy words. Her eyes sparkled faintly. Then she meticulously examined the members of their group and the area around them.

“He said the Black Barrenbloom can’t operate unless it’s near the Braves of the Six Flowers. So does that mean the seventh has it?” speculated Nashetania.

Chamo added on to that. “Chamo figures the seventh’s job is to hold on to the Black Barrenbloom and come to us. As long as they have the Black Barrenbloom, they won’t even have to do anything, and the crests disappear, and we all die...”

“Aside from me,” said Fremy.

That was when Adlet noticed the youngest Saint had gone pale. “Are you okay, Chamo?”

“...It’s scary now. If the enemy just came straight to attack us, it’d lose for sure. But, like, a gem in your stomach, or a hieroform that erases the crests... Chamo’s powers can’t do anything against that.”

“Calm down, Chamo,” said Adlet.

“Chamo’s fine, totally fine!” Chamo gave her cheeks a few slaps. She was clearly frightened. “So, Auntie? You still can’t find it?”

“The only hieroform traces I can see now are the eight Crests of the Six Flowers. There’s nothing else right here with us, nearby, or on the path we’ve

walked.”

“So does that mean the Black Barrenbloom isn’t here? Then maybe it’s still fine.” Chamo tilted her head.

After her, Adlet added, “If I remember right, you can’t find a hieroform if it’s not being used.”

“That’s right,” Mora replied. “I can only see traces if they are being used right this moment, or if they were used here in the past.”

“Maybe they freaked out about the power of the Black Barrenbloom getting discovered and stopped using it,” Chamo suggested.

“Most likely, Tgurneu is aware of the techniques that can be used to discover hieroforms. He must have done something to counteract that,” said Dozzu.

The fiend was right—Adlet couldn’t imagine Tgurneu’s ultimate weapon could be discovered with just one technique. He asked, “Mora, is there a way to make it so that those traces can’t be found?”

“I couldn’t say such a method doesn’t exist. Various criminals have attempted to do so in the past. A few may have succeeded. But without knowing what the Black Barrenbloom’s vessel is...” Mora sighed.

Adlet recalled what had happened the day before. When he had been searching for Goldof, Mora had loaned him her power to search for hieroforms. Adlet had looked at Fremy then and seen nothing strange. Was she not the Black Barrenbloom? Or had she just not activated her power yet? Or would he be unable to see her power, even if it was activated? At this point, Adlet didn’t know.

“In any case, Mora, please keep your technique for detecting hieroforms activated at all times from now on. I can’t say for sure, but it should prove somewhat effective in preventing it from being used.”

“All right. It’s simple enough to use that and my clairvoyance simultaneously. Leave it to me.” Mora nodded and continued running.

“Rolonia,” Fremy addressed the timid Saint, a tinge of kindness in her cold voice. “You did well. Thank you. We wouldn’t have learned this information

without you.”

“Th-thank you. I’m flattered by the compliment.” Rolonia smiled awkwardly.

Adlet wondered—if Fremy was aware she was the Black Barrenbloom, would she say something like that? She would have shown some sign of relief, even just a small one, that the most vital piece of information hadn’t been disclosed. But she wasn’t acting any different than usual. She must not have known what she really was, after all—or at the very least, it looked that way to him.

That was when Mora said, “About thirty fiends pursue us, and more fiends lie in wait on the fringe of the mountains.”

Adlet clicked his tongue. They hadn’t been attacked for a while, but it seemed the fiends were finally ready to fend off the Braves of the Six Flowers.

“Neow plan needed. Kill ’em all,” said Hans, and then he nimbly flipped around to attack a fiend behind him. The battle had begun.

About two hours later, they’d slogged through battle after battle. Fiends threw away their lives to slow their group down. They would rush in, then withdraw, and when the Braves tried to move on again, the fiends would recommence the attack. Each time, Adlet’s party chipped away at the enemy’s numbers while pressing ever forward.

At the front of their formation were Goldof and Rolonia. Even though Adlet knew they were allies, it was an eerie picture seeing Goldof expressionlessly scattering their enemies and Rolonia muttering vulgarities as she fought.

“Fremy, watch out!” Adlet cried from the back of the line. A snake was about to attack her from behind while she was busy shooting down enemies. Adlet darted in from the fiend’s flank to sever its neck. It kept squirming, even when sliced in two, so Adlet stilled it with the stab of a paralysis needle.

“Thanks.”

“I’ve got your back.” He stuck right behind her with his eyes alert to their surroundings. There were a lot of fiends in pursuit, but he held them back with his throwing needles and sword.

While fighting , Adlet thought. A regular warrior would have had difficulty

paying attention to his surroundings and wielding his sword at the same time, but Adlet had trained to the point where he could pull it off. Besides, their entire journey thus far had been a continuous string of situations just like these. He was quite used to it.

It really was hard for him to believe that Fremy was aware she was the Black Barrenbloom. Back in the Phantasmal Barrier, she'd saved his life, and she'd helped him unmask Nashetania, too. And she had contributed to the Six Braves' efforts since entering the Howling Vilelands as well. When they'd fled Tgurneu, she had taken on the role of rear guard, and in the Cut-Finger Forest, she'd taken the lead and scouted for enemies. The one to snipe specialist number nine had been Fremy. She hadn't caused any trouble for the group like Mora, Goldof, and Rolonia had.

But none of this proved that Fremy didn't know the truth of her identity. In the Phantasmal Barrier, she'd simply prioritized the discovery of the other seventh. And you could interpret her behavior in the Howling Vilelands as simple attempts to avoid suspicion.

But what really didn't fit was what had happened before they'd entered the Phantasmal Barrier, when Fremy and Adlet had first met. She'd refused to meet up with the other Braves, saying that if she was to encounter them, she'd be killed. Adlet had forced her into accompanying them. If Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom and her plan was to kill the others, then her behavior wouldn't make sense, since the Black Barrenbloom couldn't exercise its power unless it was close to the Six Braves. What would Fremy have planned to do if Adlet hadn't stopped her?

Thinking about these things, Adlet was forced to believe that Fremy didn't know what she really was, after all.

"Adlet," said Fremy, "it looks like there's something on your mind, but we'll be in trouble if you don't focus on the fight."

"Don't worry. I can fight and think at the same time. I'm the strongest man in the world."

"You must be very skilled. And overconfident, as usual." Fremy sighed. "Try not to do too much of that—we'll be in trouble if you slip up and get yourself

hurt.”

“Everyone, the path is becoming steeper. Kindle your lights,” Mora said to the group. The sun had now set. They’d been making their way along by the faint glow of the setting sun, but it seemed that was as far as it went. Adlet touched the light stone in one of his waist pouches and recited the incantation he’d been taught. He made the light as dim as possible in an attempt to lessen the chances of discovery, even a little bit.

The darkness didn’t affect the fiends. The one that looked to be their commanding officer cried out, and enemies charged in from ahead to attack them, all at once.

“I’m breaking through!” Goldof said, assaulting the mob solo. He made full use of his armor and his heavy build to weather the hits as he routed the fiends.

As they fought, Adlet continued to think. If it was true that Fremy didn’t know about herself, that would hurt Adlet even more. If Fremy was totally their enemy, he probably would be able to kill her. He would be able to forget his memories of her and the way they’d come to understand each other just a little bit. It would be like forgetting a dream. But if Fremy was an ally who’d fought by his side, and if everything she’d said so far was true...

“...Damn it.” He couldn’t kill her. He just couldn’t, even if that meant betraying the whole world, even if it brought about his own death, even if he understood it would stop him from fulfilling the revenge he had devoted his whole life to.

Why? Adlet asked himself.

Fremy had weighed on his mind ever since their first meeting. When he’d seen her holding that puppy, she’d captured his heart. She’d seemed terribly wounded then, as if she was suffering far more than the animal in her arms. Adlet’s love had begun not with fluttering of his heart, but with pain.

After that, in the Phantasmal Barrier, she’d told him about her past, how she had loyally served Tgurneu and her mother, how she had assassinated warriors who were candidates for Braves, and how after she’d lost to Chamo, Tgurneu had decided she’d served her purpose and discarded her.

When Adlet had run from the other Braves, Fremy had told him the reasons she wanted revenge. She hated Tgurneu, her mother, and their allies not because of their abandonment or attempts to kill her. She hated them because they'd used her love. Because they'd been deceiving her with false love.

"What I cannot forgive is not that they tried to kill me. It's that they pretended to love me."

Adlet would never forget the expression on her face when she'd said that.

Fremy lived a life supported purely by hatred, engulfed entirely by the loneliness of having lost her home. Her eyes reflected only despair. Adlet could understand her pain so well it hurt—because he'd been just like her. He'd been that lone killer with no reasons left to live aside from revenge.

But he believed the real Fremy wasn't just about despair and revenge. The hands that had embraced that puppy, the wounded fingers that had saved Adlet, these things had shown him who she really was. She was good and kind by nature. He could discern that.

Adlet wanted to see her inner truth, the real person who was buried and hidden under despair and hatred, the person whom she herself believed was long dead. He wanted to free her. He knew it was love, and it was also his dream. His dream now was to give her a happy life.

But that dream, too, might soon be crushed if it became clear that Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom, and there was no way to save the world without killing her.

That was when Mora cried out, "I've found the Temple of Fate!" She was in the center of their line, using her power of clairvoyance. Her power's range of effect was only the mountain she herself stood on. "The temple is halfway up the mountain. Brace yourselves, everyone! Just a little farther!" The others nodded and sped up the pace of their climb.

"What's going on with the fiends?"

"I'm investigating that as we speak," said Mora. "It seems...there's none inside the temple. All the fiends have come out to fight us. Once we eliminate those nearby, there should be no others to obstruct our path."

Adlet looked up at the sky. The night was still young. They had some time until the bulk of the forces under Tgurneu's command arrived. They could investigate inside.

"*Meow* , Goldof and Chamo, y'all guard Mora. The rest of us'll finish off the remainder of the fiends," said Hans, and the group, which had been fighting in tight formation thus far, dispersed all at once. "You ain't gotta fight, Mora. Investigate inside the temple and keep an eye out for any hieroforms goin' off, too." Mora nodded and focused on her clairvoyance and power to detect hieroforms.

Adlet was firing his poison needles into the remaining fiends when Hans caught up to him from behind. *He must want to talk about something* , he thought. That was convenient. Adlet had some things to discuss with him, too.

Hans had heard what Rainer had actually said at the end. They had to decide what to do about Fremy.

"What's it look like to you?" Hans asked so quietly, he was barely even audible. If he spoke any louder, Mora's clairvoyance could pick it up.

"Fremy hasn't done anything that seems off. Considering all that's happened so far, I think she doesn't know she's the Black Barrenbloom," Adlet replied with confidence.

But Hans eyed Adlet coldly. He was usually so easygoing, and he'd never shown Adlet a look like this before. "*Meow* , this is the first time."

"...The first time what?"

"That I've been disappointed in ya."

That remark was a real shock to Adlet. He had been mocked and teased more times than he could count, but what Hans had just said meant something different.

"Fremy has been worryin' over somethin' ever since we got onto this temple path," said Hans. "And she's tryin' not to show it. Yer so blind, ya couldn't even see that?"

"So what do you think she's worrying about?"

“I don’t neow.” Hans sighed. “I thought ya were pretty good...but it turns out yer really just a kid.” As an assassin, Hans had contended with many different targets, as well as clients. By comparison, Adlet had spent just about half of his life in the mountains with Atreau. The difference in their experience and eye for people was evident.

But Adlet was certain he and Fremy had a connection, however small. That was something Hans lacked. No matter what the other man said, Adlet wasn’t going to doubt Fremy.

“I know fer sure she’s worryin’,” said Hans. “But I can’t say with confidence she’s the enemy. We should watch and see a li’l meowr.”

Adlet agreed. What did the Temple of Fate hold? They could still wait until they found the answer before they revealed the secret.

The others would get suspicious if they spent too much time talking, so Adlet figured he’d leave. But then Hans said quietly, “I’ll just tell ya one thing—and I’ll tell Rolonia after, since I can’t talk to her neow.”

Adlet glanced over at Rolonia, who was spewing curses and insults ahead of them. It would indeed be difficult to talk to her right then.

“Once we neow fer sure Fremy is the Black Barrenbloom, I’m goin’ to kill ’er,” said Hans.

Adlet suppressed his distress as he objected, “And if she doesn’t kn—?”

“It might be that she don’t neow she’s the Black Barrenbloom. But I’ll kill ’er anyway.” Hans anticipated what Adlet was about to say. “Don’t you stop me, Adlet.” And as if to assert that they had nothing more to talk about, Hans walked away.

As Adlet watched him go, his own resolve silently grew stronger.

If Fremy knew she was the Black Barrenbloom and had been lying all along, then he would kill her. He agreed with Hans on that point. But if she didn’t know, if she was just being used, then he would protect her. He swore he’d find a way to prevent her from killing the others without letting her die.

This was probably dangerous. They all could die. But Adlet was resigned to

the fact that he couldn't choose any other path. Hans's ruthless statement had only ended up fueling the young man's new determination.

There had to be a way to keep her safe. Once they got to the Temple of Fate, they might find a way to block the power of the Black Barrenbloom or prevent the power of fate from being absorbed. Then they wouldn't have to kill Fremy.

They had alternatives. Rainer had said so, right? He'd said the Black Barrenbloom wouldn't be effective unless it was close to them. In other words, he just had to send Fremy off on her own. Leaving her alone would make him worry, but she was a fighter. It shouldn't be hard for her to survive. It would hurt them to lose the manpower, but they could also have her act as a decoy or play a diversion. It shouldn't pose a huge problem. They might find some other way to keep her safe.

It's my dream to make Fremy happy. She's the most important person in the world to me, and I've still never seen her smile. I can't take it.

"I am...the strongest man in the world," Adlet muttered. There was no way he couldn't realize his dream of making one woman happy.

It was just a few hundred more yards until they reached the temple. There were no more fiends pursuing them. Rolonia, in the lead, was rushing straight there, her route directed by Mora.

That was when Mora used her power of mountain echo to call out to Adlet. **"This is odd, Adlet."** He listened closely to her voice. **"The fiends are behaving differently now. Some have retreated from us to hide."**

That's odd , thought Adlet. In their fights so far, all the fiends had come charging straight toward them. Before, it had seemed like the fiends' goal was to slow them down. It was rather unexpected for some to be fleeing.

"Your thoughts? Give me your directions ," said Mora.

"I can only imagine they're setting up a trap. They might be planning to interfere with our investigation once we've gotten to the temple. Kill them all. We can go into the temple after. Figure out where they're hiding and tell the group."

Mora gave the party directions with her mountain echo, and everyone went

their different ways to slaughter the rest of the fiends.

Adlet crossed swords with one, too. It was different from the others, who had naively charged straight at him. It retreated as the boy attacked it. It seemed as if it was acting under the orders of an especially intelligent one of its kind. When Adlet threw a paralysis needle to stop the enemy from moving, he heard a gunshot from behind. A bullet smashed the fiend's head.

"Oh, if you're trying to help me out, I don't need it," Adlet said without turning to look back. He hadn't even noticed Fremy approach him. *She must want something*, he thought.

"Does the Dead Host still bother you?" she asked.

"No. I don't have the time to think about it. I have to move on—for Rainer's sake, too."

"Oh? That's good to hear." Fremy cut straight to the point. "What has been bothering you, then?"

Mora's voice came to inform them that another fiend was nearby. As the pair headed over to it, Adlet feigned nonchalance and replied, "Obviously, there's a lot of things on my mind. Like, what's the Black Barrenbloom made of? Where is it? Who's the seventh? What do we do once we get to the temple? That stuff."

"I'm asking because it seems like there's more to it than that." Fremy fired off a bullet to hobble a fiend.

"Well, yeah, of course. I'm thinking about how I can make you happy."

"You must really not have anything better to do," Fremy said coldly.

"I'm thinking about it all the time. Ever since we first met."

"You should be focusing on other things. You don't have to rack your brain to understand what would make me happy."

"And what's that?"

"To carry out my revenge and die quietly. *That* is the only thing that will make me happy."

Adlet fell silent. The two continued their search under Mora's direction. "I

don't think it has to be."

"What makes me happy is not for you to decide," Fremy said, rejecting him coldly and bluntly. "We don't have time for you to be concerned with this. It doesn't matter. Focus on the fight."

It does matter, thought Adlet. *Because this is about you.* "Sorry, but I don't feel like stopping. I don't think I can. I just end up thinking about your happiness before I even know what I'm doing."

"You're an idiot."

"What I think about is not for you to decide."

"...Maybe so."

The air between them turned a bit awkward. They could hear Rolonia's cursing and Mora's instructions. The fiends were crying out in what seemed like coded language. Among all this noise, the two were silent.

"Dying isn't the only thing that could make you happy. Didn't you tell me before that you wanted to see your dog?"

"That doesn't matter anymore. There wouldn't be any point, and I couldn't continue to care for it since I'm going to die anyway."

"But you still want to see it, don't you?"

"It's not going to happen. The Howling Vilelands are vast. I could call or whistle for it, but the dog would never come anywhere near. I'd never find it."

She wants to see it, after all, thought Adlet. "Maybe it's a small gesture, but if that's what'll make you happy, I'll do everything I can to make it happen. You make me want to do it."

"Really? Do whatever you want."

"I promise you: I'll make sure you see that dog again. I'm the strongest man in the world. I'd never break my promise."

Fremy shook her head as if to say *How stupid*.

"Now that I think of it," said Adlet, "what's that dog's name?"

"Humans give dogs names, don't they? I just found that out recently."

“Then why don’t you give it a name once you see it again? You should.”

Fremy seemed annoyed for some reason. “This is exactly why I hate you so much I can hardly bear it—what makes me want to shoot you from behind.”

None of my memories of her are nice, seriously , Adlet mused. But curiously, that didn’t change his feelings for her one bit.

“I don’t know what you two are discussing, but there are two enemies behind you. They’ve fled from Chamo toward you.” Mora’s voice came to them.

Adlet and Fremy scanned the area around them. They had indeed been hearing a fiend’s shouts. It sounded like it was giving coded instructions to its fellows. *They’re close* , thought Adlet.

An instant later, two enemies leaped out of the thicket toward them. One was a medium-sized lion-fiend, and the other was a fairly small white lizard-fiend. Adlet immediately threw a paralysis needle while Fremy fired a shot. Both missed.

The two fiends ran right by them, trying to escape. Adlet held the lion-fiend back and called to Fremy, “You handle the white one!” He figured she wouldn’t have a problem beating it.

But then something unusual happened. Right as Fremy was about to load her next bullet, it slipped from her fingers. While it rolled to the ground, her target slipped past her and ran away.

This was the first time Adlet had ever seen her fumble loading a bullet. Her fingers always moved smoothly, too fast for the eye to see. Her eyes were locked on the white lizard-fiend. She made no move to chase it. Had something startled her?

There was no time to think about it. Adlet ran after the fleeing creature. It was yelling in a continuous stream. Judging from the sound of its voice, it could probably speak human language, but Adlet couldn’t make out what it was saying.

That was when Adlet saw Dozzu, who’d been fighting farther away, dash toward them. “We don’t need the help!” Adlet yelled.

Adlet crossed thickets and rock to arrive at a small flat area on the mountain slope. There were more than ten fiends lying dead. He could tell from their wounds that Rolonia was the one responsible, but he couldn't see the white lizard-fiend he swore he'd seen before.

In the next moment, the apparent corpses got up and charged him at once.

“!”

Three fiends had risen before him, and they weren't the sort he could finish off instantly. Adlet dodged their attacks and somehow managed to defeat them all with his sword and bombs, but the moment he took a breath— “Watch out!” He heard Dozzu's voice. Lightning roasted a fiend at Adlet's feet. Adlet had thought the creature was already dead, but it threw back its head and writhed before breathing its last.

A two-layered ambush , Adlet realized. Beforehand, the fiends had left a few of their comrades there playing dead. Then they had lured Adlet to that location, where they'd attacked him when he had his guard down. Once they made him think it was over, they'd gone in for the real strike.

“Are you all right?” Dozzu came to ask.

Adlet nodded. “Did you kill the white lizard-fiend?”

“It didn't run in my direction.”

This isn't good , thought Adlet. That was probably the one in command. They couldn't let an enemy who had sprung such a trap live.

That was when they heard Mora's mountain echo. **“...Adlet, Dozzu, it seems we've killed all the fiends.”**

“Really?” Adlet questioned. “Is the white one dead?”

“...There are no more fiends left alive. Be at ease. I've seen that it's clear.”

Mora told them to head to her position, so Adlet did so, but he couldn't clear his anxiety. There was that bullet Fremy had dropped, and the white lizard-fiend. One other thing was odd: Why had Dozzu come to save him?

Maybe it doesn't matter , Adlet figured, and he stopped thinking about it.

Finally, they all stood before the Temple of Fate.

The temple had been in sight before, even while they were killing the leftover fiends. But being confronted with it directly gave them all a shot of tension. Most of the temple was hidden under bare rock. But if they looked closely, they could just barely catch something rooflike. And under the earth, there was something like a door, locked with a chain. The rough-looking building did not suggest a temple. It looked more like a fort—or a prison.

“Something this size, we can investigate pretty fast,” said Adlet.

Mora shook her head. “It doesn’t seem this building is terribly important. I can only see very normal rooms that humans lived in and larger, more eerie rooms I assume were for fiend use. The most consequential finds are likely underground.”

“What’s underground?” he asked.

“...It’s less a basement and more a labyrinth. Wait. I’ll search for a path now.”

As Adlet listened to her, he mused that this building didn’t seem at all like a temple. Underground rooms, a labyrinth, and thick, hard defensive walls? None of that would be necessary for a temple.

That was when Mora gasped suddenly. In the dim light, Adlet could tell she’d gone pale. He figured she must have found something.

“Wh-what in the...?”

“What is it, Mora?” Adlet asked.

Mora considered a moment before looking toward Dozzu and Nashetania and saying, “I’m sorry. But you two cannot accompany us any farther.”

“Oh my,” Nashetania exclaimed, standing beside them.

“Why not?” asked Dozzu. “Coming all this way just to wait for no reward? That would void all point in coming at all.”

“I can’t let enemies of the Braves of the Six Flowers get near what’s inside.”

“What did you find, Mora?” asked Adlet. Mora was shaking her head, as if she was afraid even to say it out loud.

“Our knowledge may be necessary for your investigation of the Black Barrenbloom. Pardon me, Mora, but we can’t acquiesce to your demand,” said Dozzu.

Chamo countered it. “But we’re already done with Dozzu and Nashetania, aren’t we, now that we’re here? Let’s kill them.”

Tension electrified the air around them, but then a hand gently restrained Chamo’s foxtail. It was Fremy’s.

“We still need them—for now.” In her other hand, Fremy manifested a bomb, and she threw it at the door. There were one, two explosions, and the chain that held the door shut shattered and fell. “Right now, finding out about the Black Barrenbloom is more important than anything else, though we always have to keep an eye on Dozzu and Nashetania.”

“You’ll support us?” said Dozzu. “Thank you very much.”

Fremy replied coldly, “I’m not doing this for you.”

Dozzu and Fremy were about to step inside when Mora stood in front of the gate to stop them. “What you’ve said is reasonable, Fremy, but inside here is...”

Adlet cut in. “You’re being really stubborn. What happened?”

Falteringly, Mora said, “In a great room within the labyrinth...there is a Saint. She appears to be just a corpse, but she’s definitely alive.”

“So what about this Saint?” asked Fremy.

Still hesitant, Mora said, “I’ve only seen it with my clairvoyant eye, so I have no proof. I ask that you not laugh, if it’s a simple mistake on my part, but...I believe that Saint...is the Saint of the Single Flower.”

All the Braves were shocked speechless—but Adlet saw that Dozzu and Nashetania remained unruffled. Their expressions indicated they were completely unsurprised at the news.

Goldof and Adlet slammed the locked door with their shoulders, forcing it open, and the entire group surged into the Temple of Fate at once. They left a few of Chamo’s slave-fiends outside to keep watch.

It hadn’t been visible from the outside, but the interior was quite well lit.

Gems shone within the glass lamps embedded in the ceiling—light gems, just like the ones they carried, which had to be very valuable. To use them in place of simple lamps was wildly extravagant. Not even Piena’s coliseum or courthouse had such luxury.

The interior was just as unlike a temple as the outside. The great hall by the entrance was decorated with paintings and rugs on the floor, just like a noble’s estate.

Mora explained the structure of the aboveground area and the path through the labyrinth in simple terms, informing them that the all-important figure, the person she believed was the Saint of the Single Flower, rested in the deepest part of the labyrinth.

“So it really is the Saint of the Single Flower,” Adlet said to himself.

The group ignored the apparent dining rooms and great halls and proceeded straight down the path to go underground.

The Saint of the Single Flower. To Adlet, she was less a historical figure and more like a character from a fairy tale. Hearing that she was alive and so close didn’t feel real.

One thousand years ago, the attack of the Evil God and its fiends had brought the world to the brink of disaster, and the Saint of the Single Flower had suddenly appeared. Using the then unknown power of a Saint, she had fought with the Evil God, a being whom no one had previously been able to approach.

After sealing the Evil God in the Weeping Hearth, the Saint of the Single Flower left the Crests of the Six Flowers and temples for the selection of the Six Braves to the people. She also instructed them on how they might become Saints. It could be said that every weapon they had to fight the Evil God was the legacy of the Saint of the Single Flower.

And then, just as suddenly as she had appeared, the Saint of the Single Flower disappeared. No matter how the people searched for her, they couldn’t find a single clue.

She had seemed inhuman—in fact, some people believe she wasn’t actually a human, but the Spirit itself.

“It may not be so strange that she’s alive. The power of the Saint of Fate is beyond our imaginings. I couldn’t even deny the possibility that she may have overcome aging and death,” said Mora. “No new Saint of Fate has been chosen since the Saint of the Single Flower. It was always believed that was because the power of fate was unique. But...is the truth much simpler?”

That she was alive, by itself, wasn’t important. The question was why she was there and what Tgurneu had been doing. What’s more, what did Dozzu plan to do?

Just as Mora had said, it would be dangerous to let Dozzu and Nashetania approach the Saint of the Single Flower. Adlet couldn’t even guess what they might get up to. But they might end up leaning on Dozzu’s and Nashetania’s knowledge anyway to find out about the Black Barrenbloom.

“This is it,” announced Adlet.

They opened an iron door in the central area of the temple to find stairs leading downward. Conveniently, there was even a railing. Inside the stairway heading underground, they found more lamps shining with light gems, too. There weren’t as many, unsurprisingly, and it was rather dim in the stairway, but they would have no problems in their search.

Chamo left some slave-fiends stationed by the entrance to the labyrinth, just in case, and the party ran through the maze of reinforced brick walls and stone paving. Mora’s directions led them up and down stairs.

“This isn’t good,” commented Dozzu. “This route is quite complex. Do you understand the way, Mora?”

“Tis no problem,” Mora replied. “I’ve already determined the shortest path to the innermost room.”

“Tgurneu has created quite the nuisance for us, hasn’t he? This would have been a serious difficulty without you, Mora.”

Indeed, the underground labyrinth was absurdly large; searching through it normally would have taken a whole day. They were lucky to have Mora and her clairvoyant eye with them.

“So, Dozzu. You knew the Saint of the Single Flower is here?” Mora asked as

they proceeded.

“All we knew was that the Saint of the Single Flower was alive and Tgurneu had her in his control,” Dozzu replied with no indication that it was hiding anything. “We didn’t know where she was, but we believed she couldn’t be anywhere but here. We also aren’t sure of what Tgurneu has been doing here—though we’ve made some hypotheses.”

“How did you know the Saint of the Single Flower is alive? Was that because of Hayuha as well?”

“Are you implying that there’s some other reason we could know?” Dozzu answered readily.

“Why did you not tell us?”

“Because we have no obligation to reveal all our information to you.”

“I’ve figured you out. Your goal is to use us to reach the Saint of the Single Flower. What exactly will you attempt to do to her?”

“Right now, our goal is to uncover Tgurneu’s plot and defend the Braves—nothing else.”

Adlet listened to their exchange and thought *That’s a lie. There’s no way those conniving schemers aren’t plotting anything.* Their goal all along had been to use the Six Braves to get close to the Saint of the Single Flower. Their claims of cooperation with them might have been no more than a means to achieve that.

As if reading Adlet’s thoughts, Nashetania said, “We’re telling the truth about wanting to find the seventh and stop the Black Barrenbloom. Don’t worry.”

Pushing forward along the most direct route, they covered the whole maze in just over ten minutes and arrived before a thick iron door. Even without Mora’s explanation, Adlet could immediately tell this was the deepest part of the labyrinth.

It wasn’t locked. Before opening the heavy iron door, Hans said, “Goldof, Chamo, watch Dozzu and Nashetania here. If they do anythin’ funny, let us neow.”

The three humans and one fiend stopped outside the room, and the other five quietly went inside.

“...Is that it?” murmured Adlet.

The room was massive and boxlike, about a hundred yards square. The walls and ceiling were covered in white rock, and the barren space lacked any decoration at all. The only thing that drew the eye was the single chair in the room’s center and the person sitting on it.

The figure was so odd that, at first, Adlet didn’t know which peculiarity he should focus on. The one sitting on that chair had transformed into a shriveled mummy: skin discolored to brown, thin skin over bones, and sunken eye sockets.

Mysteriously enough, the mummy was beautifully dressed, wearing a loose-fitting gown with white lace. Adlet recalled that the nobles who had observed the fights in the Tournament before the Divine had been wearing similar outfits. The brand-new gown clashed with the ancient-looking room.

All of her hair had fallen out of her head, and atop it was a tiara decorated elaborately with artificial flowers. Just a glance was enough to tell such an item was valuable.

“Meow-hee-hee , that’s a pretty fancy getup. A li’l different from the stories I’ve heard.” In the legends of the Saint of the Single Flower, she had worn simple clothing. They said she’d had a worn-out robe, no shoes, and a unique mask that was always on her face. This well-dressed mummy didn’t seem at all like the Saint of the Single Flower.

Adlet moved in closer. The whole body was bound in chains. The wrists and ankles peeking out from underneath the gown were wrapped in chains, as was the torso underneath the gown. The chains were about as thick as Adlet’s thumb, and looked severely deteriorated.

Adlet was about to touch them when Mora yelled at him. “Don’t touch it so carelessly. That chain is a hieroform. I don’t know its effects, but there are incredibly strong powers within.” Adlet snatched back his hand.

“Whoa, creepy. What is that? Is that really the Saint of the Single Flower?”

Chamo was peeking in through the cracked-open door.

“Keep a proper watch,” Hans reprimanded her.

The mummy was not the only odd thing there. Next Adlet turned his gaze upon the baffling characters written on the floor around the chair. He’d seen characters like that before. Something similar had been written on that slate in the temple, back in the Phantasmal Barrier. It had to be those hieroglyph things, the language the Saints used for their techniques or creating hieroforms. The blue characters were densely packed around the chair, filling an area about fifteen feet in radius. It looked as if the words were faintly glowing.

Fremy only glanced at the Saint of the Single Flower, then shifted her focus entirely to the hieroglyphs.

“Is this really the Saint of the Single Flower?” asked Adlet.

“I have reason to believe it is. If you observe closely, you should be able to tell, too,” said Mora.

Adlet gave the figure a good look.

Some of the fingers on her left hand were missing. Her pinkie was gone from the root, and the tips of her middle and ring fingers were gone, too. It was said that, once, the Saint of the Single Flower had lost the fingers of her left hand while battling with fiends. She had healed her wounds with the power of fate, but her fingers hadn’t grown back fully. Similarly, she was also missing her left ear. The legends told how she’d gotten that wound, too. The large scar running from her mouth to her jaw was from a fiend who would later be called Archfiend Zophrair. Her right wrist was slightly warped, too, where the Evil God’s tentacle had once broken it. The many scars matched the folklore of the Saint of the Single Flower.

“It looks like her to me, too,” said Adlet. “Though it could just be a corpse with scars made in the same places as the legends.”

“What about how ya said she’s alive?” Hans said next.

Adlet was skeptical. The Dead Host, who they’d fought three hours earlier, had been shriveled and rotting, but even so, they’d still had enough function left to be alive. But this was different. This body was entirely mummified.

“It’s alive. She breathes, and her heart beats,” said Mora. This was so unexpected, Adlet found it hard to believe.

“Then what is she?” asked Hans. “A mummy that meowves around and wears fancy clothes?”

“That’s a good question...but I don’t know,” said Mora.

Adlet stood before the figure in the chair and said, “Saint of the Single Flower, so...good to meet you. I’m Adlet, the strongest man in the world. As you can see, I’m a Brave of the Six Flowers. We’ve come here to seal away the Evil God.” He waited for a reply but got no reaction. “There’s something I want to ask. We’ve got a fake Brave. They’ve infiltrated our group with a seventh crest that you can’t tell apart from the others. We can’t figure out who the impostor is with our powers alone. You must be able to tell.” There was no reply.

Adlet gently touched her shoulder with his hand. It wasn’t covered in chains. “Saint of the Single Flower, pardon me.” Adlet shook the body. The chains swayed and jangled, but the Saint of the Single Flower didn’t react.

Rolonia and Mora approached the Saint. “Let’s try healing her,” said Mora. “At any rate, it seems touching her poses no immediate danger.” Mora’s hands glowed, and the light was sucked into the Saint of the Single Flower’s body.

Rolonia put her hands on the figure as well and tried to manipulate the blood within her body. But after a moment, she removed her hands again. “My powers won’t work. There isn’t a single drop of blood left in her body. I can’t use any of my techniques like this.”

“So isn’t she dead?” asked Adlet.

“There’s zero blood in there, but her heart is beating,” Rolonia replied. “I don’t understand how she’s alive.”

“How about you, Mora?” Adlet looked toward the elder Saint. She looked to be pouring the energy of the mountain into the body, but Adlet couldn’t see any changes. Still, they had no choice but to continue.

“Meow , and I had my hopes up.”

“Yeah,” Adlet agreed.

When Adlet had heard that the Saint of the Single Flower was there, he'd thought they might have been able to solve all their mysteries, since she was the one who'd created the crests. Not only did she have to know which one of them was the seventh, Adlet had also figured she could be able to tell them in detail about the Black Barrenbloom. But they couldn't get any information out of her like this.

Why was she here? Why was she chained up? Why was she wearing a modern gown? What had Tgurneu done to her? And why was she alive in the first place? Why had she disappeared without telling anyone a thousand years ago? Adlet felt like these mysteries were far from being solved—they were just getting deeper.

Mora removed her hands from the Saint of the Single Flower and shook her head.

"So?" said Adlet.

"There's nothing I can do. As Rolonia has just said—it's unthinkable she's alive at all in this state."

"Then how is she alive?"

"The power of fate is the ability to reject unwished-for futures," Mora explained. "It's theoretically nearly omnipotent. If she has used the power of fate to refuse the future of her own death, then perhaps it may be possible for her to go on living."

They no longer had the option of asking the Saint of the Single Flower what was going on. What remained were the hieroglyphs written on the floor. Fremy had been on her knees for a while now, decoding them. And after giving up on healing the Saint, Rolonia had also turned her gaze to the hieroglyphs.

"Can you two read that?" asked Adlet.

"I-I'm sorry...I don't understand it at all," said Rolonia.

"There's no way around that," said Mora. "You were only taught the crafts of battle and healing. What about you, Fremy?"

"I get a little. It's so sophisticated, and there are lots of parts I don't

understand, too. But I can parse the hieroglyphic structure. Look at this part.” Fremy pointed to a section near the center. “I think that’s probably an expression used to steal power from a Saint. Have you ever seen this?”

Mora eyed it for a few moments. “This is the first I’ve ever witnessed such an expression, but...indeed, perhaps it would be possible to do so with something like this.”

“Frankly,” said Fremy, “I only half believed that person from the Dead Host, but it’s becoming quite plausible.”

Mora said to Rolonia, “Let’s proceed with the deciphering, and we’ll have Chamo help as well. You go take her place on watch.”

“Y-yes ma’am.” Rolonia and Chamo switched places, and the three Saints inside divvied up the job of deciphering the hieroglyphics.

“These are voidscribed. An unusual choice,” said Mora.

“So who’s the source of the voidscribed power?” said Chamo. “The Saint of the Single Flower, then?”

Fremy chimed in. “The language structure is the power of fate itself. It’s drawn in a dual-wheel format, which may indicate that the main inscription is not in the center.”

With the women discussing the hieroglyphs, Adlet and Hans were excluded from the conversation. The pair couldn’t make heads or tails of it. They looked at each other and shrugged.

“Adlet, Hans,” said Mora, “If you’ve nothing to do, then search outside this room. There are a number of small, suspicious rooms around here. My clairvoyance alone may not be enough to find everything.”

“Yeah, gotcha,” Adlet said. But before leaving the room with the Saint of the Single Flower, he asked, “Let me just ask this. Once you’ve deciphered that stuff, what will we know?”

Fremy answered. “Roughly speaking, hieroglyphs are a recorded expression of the function of a hieroform. You could say the inscription determines what the hieroform does. By deciphering them, we can understand what kind it is.”

“So if you can decode this...?”

“Then we’ll understand what the hieroform they created really is—and it’s most likely the Black Barrenbloom,” Fremy said, returning to translating.

“So were the hieroglyphs here written by the Saint of the Single Flower?” Chamo asked, her eyes on the symbols.

“No,” said Mora. “It was someone else.”

“Why d’you think that?” Chamo asked.

“The hieroglyphic book that the Saint of the Single Flower left to us still remains at All Heavens Temple. But her writing in those books is horribly messy and crude, unlike the inscription here.”

Really? thought Adlet. It was an oddly human thing to learn about the legendary Saint of the Single Flower. “Well, whatever. Let’s go, Hans. It doesn’t look like we’ll be useful here.” Adlet went out. But right before leaving the room, Hans whispered something quietly to Mora.

“What was that?” asked Adlet.

“I just told her to watch meowt for Dozzu,” Hans replied.

That seemed a little odd to Adlet, but he didn’t push any further.

They left the room and told Goldof and Rolonia what was going on, then told them to stay there and keep watch on Dozzu and Nashetania.

Nashetania said, “Adlet, is there anything I can help with?”

“No. You just do as you’re told and wait right there,” Adlet told her flatly. He didn’t want them getting up to anything.

“You’re being paranoid with us. There are plenty of ways we could assist you.”

“Don’t need it.”

Nashetania shrugged.

Adlet decided to leave the others and look around in the various small rooms around the area. Hans went off to the west side, while Adlet headed to the east.

With Mora giving him directions, he went around looking at the various small rooms. The first room he went into looked like a lounge with a few sofas, cupboards, and a chess board, along with a snakes-and-ladders board, too, plus some simple cooking implements. Everything there was covered in dust and seemed long-unused.

A short distance away was a room that had to be for research. There was a large table in the center, a bulletin board on the wall, and many bookshelves, but it seemed everything that could have been informative to them had been taken away.

It looked like quite a few humans and fiends had been going in and out of this labyrinth, though there was no way for Adlet to know what they'd been doing.

He continued searching, but he wasn't finding anything. He was beginning to suspect this was a waste of time.

That made his mind turn to Fremy, and Hans, too. If they proved the truth of the Black Barrenbloom right now, and if it was Fremy, Hans would kill her on the spot. What should he do to keep that from happening?

As Adlet considered this, he continued his search. The next room he entered seemed to have once been used by fiends. A few fiend bodies were inside, and a light gem lamp hung from the ceiling.

The moment Adlet saw it, an insight flashed in his mind. He didn't know if he could make this happen—he'd decide once the others were done examining the hieroglyphs. But if the time came, he had to do it. "Mora, Mora," Adlet said. "Can you hear me?"

After a moment, he heard Mora's mountain echo. **"What is it?"**

"I think there's a fiend in this room. I got the feeling that something moved behind me. You didn't see it?"

"...I'm sorry. I was concentrating on deciphering the hieroglyphs, so I wasn't able to watch you. However, it does appear from what I can see here that nothing has happened."

"...I understand. Sorry for bothering you."

Mora hadn't been watching this room—so this would probably work.

About an hour later, Mora summoned him, telling him the decryption was done.

When Adlet returned to the room containing the Saint of the Single Flower, he found the others all standing in front of the door. When Adlet came to join them, Mora began to speak. "...I'll explain the results, everyone. Frankly speaking, the situation isn't favorable," she said, her expression grim.

But Adlet wasn't the type to get rattled over something like this.

"First, the person in that room is unmistakably the Saint of the Single Flower—the reason being that the hieroglyphs written on the floor include an expression for absorbing the power of the Spirit of Fate. The one seated over there must be the Saint of Fate."

Adlet nodded and listened to what Mora had to say next.

"We also found out that a hieroform was created with this stolen power, one that absorbs the abilities that the Saint of the Single Flower left behind. The Black Barrenbloom. The information we received from that man in the Dead Host was no lie."

"I expected as much. So?" said Adlet.

"In order to create a hieroform with great power, an expression is needed. The effects of the hieroform are manifested by inscribing hieroglyphs to define its function. So by reading the expression, it's possible to decipher what it does, its shape, anything. We've achieved a general understanding of the Black Barrenbloom's power."

"That's weird," said Hans. "If mew can find out what the hieroform's power is by readin' the hieroglyphs, then why didn't Tgurneu erase 'em? Plus, they didn't even have to write those expressions here. Tgurneu wouldn't want it all gettin' found, right?"

"It seems you require an explanation," said Mora. "First of all, hieroglyphs, once written, cannot be erased. If they were, it would affect the hieroform as well, causing it to malfunction and its effects to disappear."

“Then if we smash up these glyphs, we can stop the Barrenbloom?” said Hans.

“That cannot be done, either. This has been inscribed with special characters called voidscribed hieroglyphs. You can think of it as using the Spirit’s power itself as ink. This can never be erased.”

“Hrmeow...”

Adlet asked further, “But why did Tgurneu write it here? There must have been a more secure location.”

“The composition of this expression requires stealing power from the Saint of the Single Flower. It’s ineffective if not written close to her. Tgurneu must have had no choice but to inscribe the hieroglyphs here.”

“I see...got it,” said Adlet. “Continue.”

“Yes.” Mora spent a moment considering how to explain. “But not everything about the Black Barrenbloom is written here. The expression has been split in two. The fundamentals of the expression are inscribed here, while the rest is written elsewhere. I searched for the rest of the equation with my clairvoyance, but it’s not within this temple. The ones who created the Black Barrenbloom—Tgurneu and its subordinates—have deliberately concealed it.”

“They got us there. What do we do?” Hans sighed.

Mora continued. “First, I’ll discuss what we discovered based on what was written here: Everything that the man Rolonia saved said...was true.”

“Oh...” Adlet was a little shocked. Somewhere in his heart, he’d wanted Rainer’s message to be a lie. If it was, they wouldn’t have to kill Fremy.

“The Black Barrenbloom absorbs the power of the Crests of the Six Flowers,” Mora explained. “Or to be more precise, it may make something else absorb it. It can be read either way.”

“That’s pretty vague,” said Adlet.

“I’ll discuss it more later. There are many unknowns. But what’s certain is that as long as the Black Barrenbloom is here, eventually, our crests will lose power and vanish. All of us aside from Fremy will die, and Fremy will no longer be able to injure the Evil God.”

“And Her Highness?” Goldof cut in. “Will her...crest...vanish, too? Is her...life...in danger?”

“I don’t know. Nashetania’s crest is an exception. I can’t say anything now, and similarly, the seventh’s crest is an unknown.”

Nashetania said to Goldof, “I can’t survive in the Howling Vilelands without the crest, either. Only Tgurneu’s subordinates have the ability to keep humans alive here.”

“Never mind about Nashetania,” said Adlet. “What’s important is when the crests will disappear. How much time do we have left?”

“That depends on how quickly the Black Barrenbloom is absorbing power,” answered Mora. “Unfortunately, it seems clear that it has already been activated. The voidscribed hieroglyphs are in the active state. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t be glowing.

“And the longer it is active, the more powerful it becomes, as it makes the power it has absorbed its own. The more it absorbs, the stronger it gets. And its effects will become even more powerful when we approach the Evil God—or to be more precise, the barrier that seals it in.”

“Why is that?” asked Adlet.

“Because the Crests of the Six Flowers are, in essence, a part of the barrier. When the Crests of the Six Flowers, the Black Barrenbloom, and the seal are all in one place, the Black Barrenbloom will begin to absorb tremendous power from the barrier to become even stronger. Then the Crests of the Six Flowers will fail.”

“In other words...”

“If we had unknowingly approached the Weeping Hearth...we probably all would have died.”

A chill ran down Adlet’s spine. If he hadn’t chosen to go to the temple, or if they hadn’t joined up with Dozzu and Nashetania...it would have been over for them.

“We were lucky.” Even easygoing Hans’s face was pinched tight.

“I have just one piece of good news,” said Mora. “It’s pointless for the Black Barrenbloom to approach the Evil God alone. We’ve learned that its power only increases if it’s near the Crests of the Six Flowers. If the crests are not nearby, it can’t absorb anything from the seal.”

They were all a little relieved. At the very least, it seemed they would be all right as long as they didn’t go near the Evil God.

“We discovered one other thing,” Mora continued. “It seems Tgurneu is the only one who can activate the Black Barrenbloom—most likely because it’s wary of any scheming from Cargikk or Dozzu.”

“That sounds like something Tgurneu would do. He doesn’t trust anyone but himself,” said Dozzu.

“So then the issue is what to do,” said Mora. “We’ve not averted this crisis. If this hieroform is nearby, our crests will eventually disappear.”

“Worst case scenario, we might have to split into two groups. Rainer said the Black Barrenbloom can’t use its power unless it’s near the Six Braves. So if we split up, then half of us’ll escape it,” said Adlet.

But Mora’s expression clouded. She seemed to have a hard time saying it, so Fremy spoke instead. “...That won’t work, either. The Black Barrenbloom has to be near the Braves the moment it activates. But once it’s activated, it’ll keep absorbing power, even if they’re apart. It doesn’t work nearly as quickly compared to when they’re close, but separation doesn’t nullify the effect itself.”

“So you’re saying the danger decreases...but doesn’t go away entirely, huh?” muttered Adlet. *This is bad*, he thought. Up until now, he’d figured that even if Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom, they could just solve the problem by separating her from the others. But now that plan was no longer an option.

The party was looking grim, and not just the Braves. Dozzu and Nashetania wore severe expressions as well. Until now, they’d thought that if they just knew what the threat was, they’d be able to deal with it. But there was a possibility it was already too late.

“There are various ways to stop it,” Fremy added. “First of all, just like any

other hieroform, the one who activated it can stop it. We could kill the one responsible—this was also mentioned back in the Phantasmal Barrier. We could also break the hieroform itself. But there's something about that which would concern me."

"What?"

"There's a strange expression engraved in here. It says that when the Black Barrenbloom is destroyed, a function that was stopped will activate."

"...Something?"

"It doesn't say what."

"Isn't that bad? Does this mean that even breaking it might be dangerous?"

"No. While there is something within the hieroform that will activate when the hieroform is destroyed, once the hieroform powering that function is broken, it can only manifest power for an instant—and nothing too powerful. What might happen is a mystery, but I can't imagine that it's any more dangerous than the continued existence of the Black Barrenbloom."

Adlet still believed they had to be cautious, though.

"Let me talk about what wasn't written here," she went on. "First of all, as I just said, we don't know what will happen if it's broken. Other omitted information includes a description of its power, what it's made of, and its shape. All information on that subject was thoroughly hidden. Tgurneu is more afraid of that being discovered than anything else."

"This stinks. That was the most important." A rare occurrence for her, Nashetania scowled. The others had to be thinking the same thing.

But Adlet knew the truth.

He thought about telling the others—but he put it off. *Not now*. He looked at Hans and Rolonia listening to the discussion in silence, but it didn't seem either would talk.

"We also don't know how long it will take for the crests to vanish, though this isn't because it's not written here. It depends on what happens after the Black Barrenbloom's activation," said Fremy.

“Are there no clues as to where the rest of the expression is?” Adlet pressed.

“There is something. We can tell that the rest of the hieroglyphs are written using a method called miteform inscription.”

“What the heck is that?”

“It’s the technique of engraving hieroglyphs on something very small,” Fremy explained, “such as a ring, a piece of wood, or a stake small enough to fit in your hand. The rest of the hieroglyphs are engraved on a similarly small object in safekeeping somewhere.”

“The Howling Vilelands are huge...,” Adlet muttered.

“We’d never find it.”

Silence fell among the group. Then unexpectedly, Dozzu and Fremy both opened their mouths at the same time. Fremy gestured to Dozzu to speak first.

“I beg your pardon, might I be permitted to speak?”

“You’ve got something to say, Dozzu?” asked Adlet.

“We have also come to understand a few things.”

The Braves were surprised. They all gave Rolonia and Goldof accusatory looks. They had reminded the pair not to let Nashetania and Dozzu do anything.

“Don’t worry,” said Dozzu. “We didn’t do anything without permission. I’m simply saying that just seeing the Saint of the Single Flower here has helped us learn some things. First of all, it was not Tgurneu who locked her up in this place.”

“What do you mean?” asked Adlet.

“She was here all along. After she disappeared from the human realms, she dug a massive hole in the ground here and locked herself inside.”

“...How do you know that?”

“Because both the chair she’s sitting in and the chains that bind her are hieroforms that she created herself, one thousand years ago.”

Adlet was a little shocked.

“Both are extremely powerful hieroforms,” the fiend continued. “First of all, the chair has the power to erect a barrier around this room. No one, neither human nor fiend, could enter this room, and even if someone was to discover it, its existence would instantly be erased from their memories.”

“We could get in,” Adlet pointed out.

“The hieroform has been stopped. Most likely, that was Tgurneu’s work.” Dozzu continued to speak. “The chains that bind the Saint of the Single Flower were also her own creation. The person confined by these chains cannot escape by any method, and neither can anyone move them from that place. It also prevents anyone from injuring the bound person, no matter how they try. That’s what it does.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because we...Hayuha and I, and Cargikk and Tgurneu, witnessed the Saint of the Single Flower creating these hieroforms in secret. She didn’t want anyone to find them.”

“...”

“At the time, I didn’t know what she intended to use them for, since there was no such enemy anywhere that would require the use of such powerful objects. But now I understand. The Saint of the Single Flower made those to confine herself.”

Adlet gazed at the Saint of the Single Flower. She looked incredibly eerie to him.

“One thousand years ago,” Dozzu went on, “after defeating the Evil God, the Saint of the Single Flower disappeared. She dug this hole in the earth and created this room so nobody would find her, and then she bound herself with these chains.”

“I don’t get what you mean. So in other words, you’re saying that the Saint of the Single Flower confined herself?”

“Yes.” Dozzu nodded.

“The hieroforms weren’t stolen by fiends or someone she was fighting?”

“No. No one in the world would have been capable of confining her. It would have been impossible even if all the remaining fiends at that time had worked together.”

“What does this mean...? Why would she do something like that?” Adlet muttered.

“I think Tgurneu used the hieroform Hayuha left behind to pin down the location of the Saint of the Single Flower. He broke through the barrier somehow and gained access to this room. Then he stole power from the Saint of the Single Flower and created the Black Barrenbloom. I have no proof, but I doubt I’m far off.” From its tone, Dozzu didn’t seem to be lying.

Adlet’s eyes went to the Saint of the Single Flower beyond the cracked-open door.

She was even more of an enigma than he’d imagined. She’d confined herself and then fallen into Tgurneu’s hands. Adlet didn’t understand at all what either of these things meant.

“We can also make a hypothesis based on the results of Mora, Fremy, and Chamo’s investigation: The one who created your seventh crest was not Tgurneu, but the Saint of the Single Flower herself.” Dozzu went on. “If Tgurneu had stolen power from the Saint of the Single Flower to create a seventh crest, it would have been inscribed in the hieroglyphs here. But everything here is regarding the Black Barrenbloom. I’m forced to assume, then, that the one who created the seventh crest was the Saint of the Single Flower herself.”

Mora seemed to recall something and said, “Tgurneu said the same thing—that the seventh crest was created by the Saint of the Single Flower and then bestowed to the one Tgurneu chose. So that was true as well.”

Dozzu nodded and continued. “Despite our investigations with Hayuha, I was unaware that the Saint of the Single Flower had created an additional crest at some point. Neither could I hazard a guess as to why she made it.”

So then what was the seventh crest? And who on earth was the outlier? They’d learned new information, but the mysteries had only gotten deeper.

“Tgurneu is using the seventh crest...but the extra crest was created by the

Saint of the Single Flower...” Mora put her hand to her chin, pondering.

“If that’s true,” said Adlet, “then maybe the crest itself isn’t harmful to us. Maybe it just helps us out. Maybe Tgurneu stole it, and it’s using something that was originally supposed to be for us.”

Dozzu replied, “That is a possibility.”

“Thus far,” said Mora, “we’ve been thinking of it very simply: If we uncover the seventh, we kill them. But that may, in fact, invite disaster. If we kill the seventh and the seventh crest disappears, wouldn’t that only worsen our situation?”

“*Meow*, that’s a problem. The seventh is Tgurneu’s agent, an enemy come to infiltrate our group. We can’t just leave ’em be.”

Chamo replied, “Then we just hafta not kill ’em. We just rip off their arms and carve out their eyes, and the seventh won’t be able to do anything. Then we don’t have to worry about the seventh’s crest going away.”

“*Meow*, true. Yer smart, Chamo.”

“Tee-hee.” The two chatted gleefully, but Adlet was not enthusiastic about their ideas.

“But we haven’t pinned down the seventh,” Mora said, “so we can do nothing on that front to begin with. But we should bear these things in mind, even though holding back with the seventh may prove difficult.”

The allies nodded at one another. But Adlet still wasn’t fully convinced by parts of this. If the seventh crest would help the Braves, then why had the Saint of the Single Flower been hiding it? And was she even on their side to begin with? If she wasn’t, then what were the Braves of the Six Flowers?

It looked like Dozzu still had more to say. For this part, it sounded less confident as it spoke. “There’s one more thing. It’s not really something I can call deduction—it’s nothing more than a hypothesis, but...”

“I don’t mind. Tell us,” said Adlet.

“I think Tgurneu has the ability to control human minds and force them to obey its orders.”

That's a really important thing to know!

"There are two reasons I believe this. First of all, based on my comrades' observations, there was something odd about the humans under Tgurneu's command. The majority it either threatened and forced into obeisance or deceived. But there were a select few humans who displayed absolute loyalty to it."

"...And?"

"There were really very few of them. I've only confirmed one or two. But these humans were possessed of extremely sophisticated knowledge on the subject of hieroglyphs and were likely to be at the core of his research."

"That alone is no basis to suppose that," said Mora.

Dozzu continued, "My other reason is the barrier that the Saint of the Single Flower created. One couldn't break through such a thing with just any power. It had to have been impossible for any Saint or fiend. Even if Tgurneu and I had mobilized all our knowledge of hieroglyphs, I doubt we would have ever put a dent in it. I can't think of any way the barrier could be broken...other than for the Saint of the Single Flower to let it down herself."

"So in other words, this means that Tgurneu controlled and manipulated the Saint of the Single Flower?" Adlet replied.

"I believe that might be the case, though I don't know how long she was being manipulated or what she was made to do."

It was a difficult story to believe. The Saint of the Single Flower was the most vital individual in the defense of the world. If Tgurneu had her under its control, then it really was over.

"However," said Dozzu, "the world has not, in fact, ended. The Braves of the Six Flowers were chosen as usual, too. I don't know what this means, either. Has Tgurneu been unable to control the Saint of the Single Flower entirely? Or is there some other reason...?"

"I wonder if Tgurneu's controllin' the seventh, too, *meow*."

"...Perhaps so. But perhaps not. I couldn't say."

Tgurneu controlling the seventh...that was a viable theory. But the seventh wasn't necessarily the one being controlled. What with the seventh, Tgurneu's powers of control, and the seventh crest, it seemed like the situation was getting more and more complicated.

While Adlet's mind was busy spinning, Fremy added, "There's something I'd like to say, too."

Distracted by Dozzu's theory, Adlet had forgotten that Fremy had been about to speak. But they had to have already covered everything on the topic of the Black Barrenbloom. What was she planning to say?

"What is it? I thought we had made no more discoveries. Have you thought of something?" asked Mora.

I doubt it's anything important, thought Adlet.

"Yes. There's one thing I've been thinking about. I'll get straight to the point."

But what Fremy said a split-second later made Adlet's heart freeze.

"I think I'm Black Barrenbloom."

Chapter 2

Lies



Chapter 2

Lies

It looks like...I've managed to survive.

There was a fiend inside the labyrinth. It had changed the color and pattern of its hide to match the flagstones as it pressed its body flat to the floor like a carpet, sliding along silently over the stone.

This creature had camouflage abilities, but not the power to disappear entirely like specialist number twenty-six. Anyone nearby paying close attention would probably have been able to easily see through its camouflage. But right then, Mora was surveying the temple interior with her clairvoyance and hadn't noticed its presence. The temple labyrinth was too vast, and it was impossible to keep track of everything, even for her.

When it dispelled its camouflage, it would take the form of a white lizard. This was the very creature that had appeared before Fremy and Adlet when they were on their way to the temple to lure them into its trap. It was also currently the leader of the fiends present.

This one was specialist number thirty, one of the chosen whose powers had been recognized by Tgurneu and assigned a number. This ability to conceal itself and gather information had gained it acknowledgment from Tgurneu, but the greater reason for its status was its intelligence. This fiend did not just follow its commander's orders unconditionally. It had the rare ability to judge for itself about what to do to accomplish Tgurneu's goals.

Dämn it...I'm the only one left alive. All the fiends guarding the temple had been killed save for specialist number thirty, because their former leader had ordered them all to charge at the enemy and throw away their lives. After their head had fallen, number thirty had taken over command. It had ordered the fiends to disperse and set a trap to try to slow down the Braves. It had nearly injured Adlet quite severely, but in the end, the plan had failed.

So number thirty had abandoned its subordinates and escaped on its own, evading Mora's sight with its camouflage as it observed the Braves eliminate all

fiends in the temple area. Then it had slipped into the temple ahead of the Braves, under the gap in the door. It had been hiding inside ever since.

“There are various ways to stop it. First of all, just like any other hieroform, the one who activated it can stop it. We could kill the one responsible—this was also mentioned back in the Phantasmal Barrier. We could also break the hieroform itself. But there’s something about that which would concern me.”

Number thirty listened to the Braves’s discussion from the ground.

It had one other ability, aside from its camouflage. Its entire body was a hearing organ many hundred times more sensitive than a human’s. If a human in the maze spoke at normal volume, this organ could easily hear everything.

Hearing and camouflage abilities were the only weapons in number thirty’s arsenal. It was a little lacking for a specialist, a fiend acknowledged for its unique capabilities.

“Number thirty...what are the Braves döing?”

A quiet remark came from beside number thirty—another fiend. Specialist number fourteen, who ranked higher than number thirty in the hierarchy. It had informed number thirty that it had arrived half a day ago upon learning the Six Braves were approaching the temple. It had not participated in the battle to protect the sanctuary but instead kept hidden in the labyrinth the whole time.

“It’s just as I töld you. Nothíng has changed. The Bräves have gathered before the innermost room in the labyrinth and âre investigating what lies there. They’re díscussing the Saint of the Single Flower, the Black Barrenbloom, Tgurneu’s secret weapon...and othér such things.”

“The Black Barrenbloom...whät is that? I’ve néver heard of it.” Both spoke too quietly for Mora to detect.

Tgurneu had only ordered them to protect the temple.

They didn’t know which of the Braves was the seventh, and they didn’t know what the Black Barrenbloom that the Braves kept talking about was, either. And it was only through listening in on the conversation just then that they’d discovered the Saint of the Single Flower was even in this temple.

Tgurneu was incredibly secretive. It gave the fiends under its command only the absolute minimum of information. Its subordinates just had to follow orders and were not allowed to consider the meaning or reasoning behind them. That was Tgurneu's policy.

Eventually, orders would come from their commander. The two fiends waited resolutely for that time to come.

"There is something. We can tell that the rest of the hieroglyphs are written using a method called miteform inscription."

A familiar voice reached number thirty's hearing organ—Fremy's. Number thirty recalled what had occurred just over an hour earlier. *What a foolish girl. So she'll still hesitate to kill me, will she?*

This fiend called number thirty had once lived with Fremy as a member of the family that had raised her.

It was eighteen years ago now. The white lizard-fiend had not yet been given a number, just one more worthless fiend. It recalled how terribly shocked it had been when Tgurneu had summoned it out of the blue.

After the obligatory and temporally appropriate greetings, Tgurneu said, "I must give you a fairly difficult order. What I need is intelligence and acting skills, and the ability to understand the human heart. You're the only one of my subordinates I can give this order to."

Tgurneu guided the fiend into a small cave where specialist number six was waiting. Number six had particularly unique status among Tgurneu's subordinates, and its abilities and mission were hidden in utmost secrecy. Besides, number six was an infant fiend, born only a few months ago. It was a horribly ugly and uncanny fiend, very much like a human. Tgurneu ordered number six to leave the cave, then began to speak to the nameless fiend.

Tgurneu had given the baby fiend the name Fremy Speeddraw. Hearing this name made number thirty feel uncomfortable for two reasons. To be bestowed with an individual name was the highest honor for a fiend. The fiend was irritated such an honor had been given to one born only months earlier. Not to mention, the meaningless trend of surnames was the custom of those detestable humans, wasn't it?

“This child was born of a human and a fiend,” said Tgurneu. “Her mind is likely just about the same as a human’s, too. Now then, I have some orders for you. The first one is for you to raise this child into a strong fiend. Strong enough that within twenty years, she’ll be capable of challenging me.”

The white lizard-fiend didn’t reply that such a thing couldn’t be done. If Tgurneu had ordered it, it must be possible.

“My other order is for you to induce her to loathe fiends once this child has matured into an adult. It’s not enough to make her hate us. I want you to make her *loathe* fiends so much that she feels compelled to kill us, even at the risk of her own life.”

The commander wanted the white lizard-fiend to raise this baby to be the strongest among Tgurneu’s subordinate fiends, and then induce her to loathe its kind. This order was difficult to understand, but the lizard-fiend didn’t question it.

“I actually planned to make number six do it, but I’m embarrassed to say, the sap has gone quite mad. I’m the one who gave the order to love the child, but number six has come to love her a little too much, enough to forget both my orders and loyalty to the Evil God.” Tgurneu sighed.

That was when Fremy, lying on the bed, noticed the lizard-fiend crawling on the ground and smiled at it. Kindly coddling Fremy, Tgurneu said, “Now then, what would you do? How would you make this child stronger and compel her to loathe fiends?”

As the fiend gazed at Tgurneu indulging Fremy, it thought for a while. It had experience participating in human herding and was also well versed in human psychology. “First, I would make it love some fiends, and have it work hard to become strong for these fiends’ sake. Then, those fiends would betray it severely—so much so that it would have no choice but to hate all of us,” the lizard-fiend said.

Tgurneu clapped its hands in glee. “Yes, that’s it. I’ve been looking for someone who could give me a reply like that! You hit on the optimal answer: the very one I came up with myself.” Tgurneu gave the sort of cruel smile that made even its sworn vassal shiver. “Are you able to do that?”

The white lizard-fiend nodded silently.

Once the nameless fiend accepted that role, it was given the name *specialist* and a number. After that, whenever Fremy was not present, it was called number thirty.

Number thirty was given two subordinates, and just like their superior, they possessed intellect and the ability to speak. But the one in command was number thirty. One of these subordinates came to be temporarily addressed as Red Ant, and the other, Piercing Bird. This trio's mission was to act as Fremy's family and pretend to love her.

As for number six, who was no longer necessary and should have been disposed of, number thirty requested that it be allowed to live.

Number thirty had enough authority that the request was granted, and it took number six in as its own subordinate. It figured it would need a fiend that really did love Fremy and wasn't just pretending.

Incidentally, one more creature came to live together with Fremy: that dog Tgurneu had given her. When Fremy was small, her favorite game was to make the big dog lie on its side so she could flop on the ground with her face buried in its stomach.

The four fiends raised Fremy in a cave on the edge of the Howling Vilelands. Until she learned to speak, they cared for her just as humans would. Back then, Fremy spent a lot of her time smiling and playing. According to the books they had on childcare written by humans, she seemed to be more active than a typical human child. The four fiends raised Fremy zealously: number thirty and its two subordinates with a nausea at the repulsive nature of their work, and number six, with heartfelt joy.

Then, when Fremy turned three, number thirty's work began.

The first thing they gave Fremy was fear. They took her out of the cave and introduced her to other fiends. The first thing those fiends showed her was hunger and the desire to kill. As soon as the other fiends saw her, they cried out with hatred and drooled with open mouths. Number thirty watched the scene from its hiding place.

Fremy first assumed they had come to play with her, but she eventually realized what was really going on. Though she was young, she could grasp the fear of death and their utter lack of love for her. Powerless, Fremy crumpled to the ground, eyes on the fiends' fangs, right up until the moment they made to bite into her.

Just as the fear was so engraved in her heart for life, number thirty finally came to save her. "...What are you doing? This fiend was born by Commander Tgurneu's decree."

Fremy was speechless in fear. Number thirty picked her up in its mouth and went back inside. After that, Fremy became scared to leave their home.

Of course, number thirty had orchestrated all this. But even if it hadn't, things probably would have ended up the same.

The next thing number thirty gave Fremy was anger.

The fiends in charge of the human cattle surrounded Fremy's cave and roared nonstop. Number thirty had arranged this, too—warning them to keep that a secret, of course.

"Human child, work like cattle as humans do. Dig us holes and stack stones for us. Bear children for us to eat—no, we'll just eat you!"

Number six and number thirty pushed these fiends away, saying they were raising Fremy on Tgurneu's orders and couldn't allow that to happen. Then the others attacked Fremy's family. None of Fremy's family were very strong in a fight. They were helpless, bitten, stabbed, and tormented. Fremy hid in a corner of the cave, watching and trembling.

Gradually, Fremy stopped smiling. Number thirty couldn't recall her smiling at all after the age of five.

As this lifestyle went on, number thirty and its two subordinates continued their show of love to Fremy.

As a child, she did not cry. Her lips would just tremble as she stoically endured the pain with clenched teeth.

Despondently, Fremy once asked why they hated her.

“It’s because you look like a human. You’re a real händful,” number thirty said as it hugged her.

So then she asked why she was born with a human appearance.

“Because Commander Tgurneu ordered it to be that way.”

“But the other fiends hate me anyway. Commander Tgurneu is cruel. Why doesn’t he order everyone to love me?”

When she said that, number thirty whapped her on the head. “Cómmander Tgurneu is preparing for the battle with the Six Braves. We’re fighting to déstroy the humans. He isn’t here for you. You are here for him.”

But Fremy said, “You’re all being hurt because of me. I hate that. If it’s gonna keep happening, then I want you to make me cattle. I’m okay with it, if it means you won’t get bullied anymore.”

When number thirty heard that, it gloated privately. Fear and anger cultivated love. The more enemies you have, the more strongly you feel toward the ones who protect you. Just as Tgurneu had predicted, love had burgeoned in Fremy’s heart—nurtured for the time when they would eventually betray her.

“It’s tough fór us, too. You’re important tö us, so it hurts to see you suffer. But we’ll êndure this. So you should, too.” Number six and the other fiends gently nestled close to Fremy. She embraced her mother and fell stubbornly silent.

As she choked back her tears, her dog came up to her. Perhaps it had gotten the idea that she was crying. The dog licked Fremy’s cheek, and she noticed that the fiends had hurt the dog, too. And then, in a voice so grief-stricken it sounded like blood was coming up from her throat, she said, “I want to become stronger. I want to get back at them. If I become stronger, no one will be able to bully you anymore.”

It’s too perfect. It’s going so well, it’s scary , thought number thirty.

When Fremy was six years old, she was given a gun and told that the plan was for her to eventually become a Saint. Number thirty recalled that Fremy had trembled with elation and joy at the time. After that, she threw herself into her study of firearms, training hard and often for battle.

Her family of four fiends helped with her training. When it seemed her severe daily routine would wear her out, they scolded her mercilessly. Sometimes, when she complained, they would kick her out of their home. Her only comfort at these times was her dog. But Fremy withstood those difficult days of training. Number thirty knew it was far too harsh a trial to impose on a young child. But it didn't care.

Meanwhile, Tgurneu had some humans build the Temple of Gunpowder. This temple, created for the selection of a new Saint, was finished when Fremy was twelve. Fremy became what would most likely be the only Saint of Gunpowder in history.

"I'll become strong, better than anyone, and I'll put them to shame. I'll never let anyone hurt my family ever again," Fremy said, clutching her weapon.

Fremy most likely did not have that much potential as a Saint. She was also one of the weakest of her kind, physically. But she gained strength through her wholehearted desire to triumph over the others and protect her family. If number thirty had made the others accept her and raised her as a normal fiend, she probably would have ended up with only commonplace powers. It was her love and her hate that enabled her to grow strong.

Eventually, Fremy infiltrated in the human realms and began to kill candidates for Brave. She took the heads of warriors like Athlay, Saint of Ice, and Bowmaster Matra, who would have become threats if they had lived.

In time, even some fiends began to acknowledge her accomplishments. She was a worthy fiend. Some voices began to say that they had been wrong for trying to get rid of her, and that they never should have doubted Commander Tgurneu's keen insight in arranging her birth.

But this posed a bit of a problem for number thirty, because it had to make Fremy hate fiendkind. That was its most important mission. So every time fiends came forth with such opinions, number thirty forbade them from expressing their thoughts in front of Fremy, firmly emphasizing that this was Tgurneu's will.

Before long, Fremy began to despair. No matter how many accomplishments she had under her belt, the other fiends would not acknowledge her. She came

to believe she was a monster who would never be accepted by the other fiends.

Having raised Fremy, number thirty understood quite well that she wanted to be acknowledged as an adult. She wanted to be accepted as a fiend, not for her own sake, but for her family's. She believed it would undoubtedly make them happy.

Number thirty crushed that hope utterly. A half human like Fremy would never be accepted by fiendkind. Gradually, Fremy began to give up.

Even so, Fremy didn't lose her fighting spirit. It didn't matter to her if the others wouldn't accept her. She had her mother, number thirty, and the two housemates, and their love alone was true.

Fremy would gladly have given her life for her family's sake.

Eventually, the time came to bring it all to a close. Number thirty was summoned before Tgurneu again.

"Wonderful, number thirty! Your work has surpassed even my imaginings," said Tgurneu. "I like to observe human faces. I enjoy witnessing the way they suffer. But suffering alone isn't enough. I love to watch their faces as they worry, vacillate, seek answers, or wander adrift." Tgurneu smiled in recollection.

"Fremy has shown me such wonderful expressions. A superb mixture of hatred and love. A mess of pain, humiliation, and despair, she clings to her bonds with you all. Should she hate fiendkind, or should she love us? She wavers, unable to answer even that question."

This didn't really feel like praise to number thirty.

"You've done a good job. You've given me a good show."

It was times like these when number thirty would suddenly have doubts about Tgurneu. It tormented those under its command. Number thirty believed this was unavoidable, as it was for the sake of the Evil God and fiendkind. But number thirty also wondered if, just perhaps, Tgurneu simply liked to watch people suffer.

Cargikk, the other commander of the fiends, loved the fiends deeply. It called

its subordinates its own children, and they endured their struggles together. Perhaps number thirty was serving the wrong master... But it shook off those doubts. Cargikk's kindness would not bring victory—what they needed was Tgurneu's ingenuity and heartlessness.

“Right now, Fremy is heading out to kill Chamo Rosso. Of course, she will lose, and then she will come back to us. Her return will be the time we've been waiting for.” Tgurneu smiled. “I'll be witness to it, too. Oh, I am so looking forward to this.”

To betray and hurt Fremy was their final task.

Number thirty carefully informed number six, who loved Fremy from the bottom of its heart, that this was necessary for their plan, that making Fremy hate them was only temporary, and that, eventually, they would reveal everything to her and welcome her back to the fold. That was when Fremy would truly become one of them. Foolishly, number six believed it.

Number thirty loyally carried out the final stage of the plan. When Fremy came back from her loss, they thoroughly tormented her, wounded her, and drove her to despair in front of Tgurneu, seemingly enjoying it. Even now, number thirty remembered the look on Fremy's face when they had betrayed her. All expression had vanished; her face had lost all emotion.

The four fiends had attacked Fremy. They'd been given strict orders not to kill her, but they hadn't been prohibited from injuring her. They all tortured her incessantly and freely until Fremy fled to the human realms, and then number thirty's job was done.

Now, number thirty's mission was complete in full. Fremy had come to hate fiendkind from the bottom of her heart, just as Tgurneu had requested—though number thirty didn't understand the point.

Of their family, Fremy killed Piercing Bird and Red Ant. Number thirty, relieved of its duty, was sent back to its old errands. Number six, deemed completely useless, was deployed at the fringes of the Howling Vilelands. Believing Fremy would return, it continued to take diligent care of Fremy's old dog. Five months after Fremy's disappearance, Cargikk's followers had attacked and killed number six, or so number thirty heard. Nobody had really paid

attention.

When the time for battle with the Braves of the Six Flowers drew near, Tgurneu had suddenly shown up and gleefully declared, "It seems Fremy is in quite the sad state. Some human pursuers nearly killed her, so she's been running around, hiding her identity, starving, frightened, and surviving in despair. I love it. It's amazing. Humans are useful, after all. They're hurting Fremy in my place. I'd like to give those pursuers a present."

Number thirty couldn't understand what about this was so enjoyable.

"I wonder if Fremy has come to understand that nobody will love her? It would be best if she did." Tgurneu was smiling.

And then, Fremy, who number thirty had raised, arrived once more in the Howling Vilelands, as their enemy. She had given herself up to the hatred that number thirty had nurtured in her and was killing fiend after fiend.

At present, she was talking with the other Braves about the Saint of the Single Flower and a hieroform called the Black Barrenbloom.

"...Fremy, this is news to me. What do you mean?" Mora asked, her tone incredulous.

Adlet shared her feelings. He didn't know how Fremy knew. Thinking that Hans or Rolonia must have told her, he glanced at them, but they seemed to be surprised by Fremy's sudden declaration.

"I thought I would wait until everyone was together to say it, since it would have been double the effort to do it earlier," Fremy replied.

Mora pressed again. "You say you're the Black Barrenbloom?"

"The Black Barrenbloom might be me, or it could be inside me. A part of my body might be the Barrenbloom. I couldn't say which, but it's connected to me."

"Is this a confession? Did you know about the Barrenbloom?"

Fremy shook her head. "No. Until we heard about it from Dozzu, I'd never heard any such thing. I didn't know what it did until we analyzed the hieroglyphs, either."

“So then why do you believe it is you?”

“I remembered something. I think...I’ve been here before.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean?” Adlet asked.

Fremy shot Adlet a look and then continued. “Since that explanation isn’t enough, I’ll be more detailed. When making a hieroform, the future vessel for that hieroform absolutely must come into contact with the hieroglyphic expression. The expression that created the Barrenbloom is divided into two or more parts, but ultimately, its foundational elements are written right here. The object has to have come into contact with these hieroglyphs once.”

“What does that matter?” said Mora. “The fact that the expression and hieroform must come into contact needs no explanation.”

“...Sorry,” Adlet said to her. “I didn’t know until she explained it.”

“When we first came in here,” Fremy continued, “I had a sense of déjà vu. At first, I thought I was just imagining it, but looking at the Saint of the Single Flower, the memories slowly began to return. They’re vague, but I have seen her up close before. I think I came here when I was very young, most likely before I could even walk properly. Until we came here, I had no recollection of it at all. But actually seeing it has helped me remember.”

“But just saying that you’ve seen this isn’t enough to say for sure that you’re the Barrenbloom,” Adlet shot back.

“Tgurneu kept this place very hidden. I’d never even heard rumors of it. What need would there be to take me there? Why would Tgurneu show me inside, and why would it have brought me to the Saint of the Single Flower?”

Adlet had nothing to say to that.

“I can’t make any conclusions about the Black Barrenbloom yet,” she said, “but it makes the most sense to assume that it’s me.”

“Wait,” Adlet cut in. “Mora, is there even a way to make a human or fiend into a hieroform in the first place?”

“...There is,” Mora replied. “Over five hundred years ago, a Saint devised a method of making a human into a hieroform. Because this method inevitably

caused that person's death, knowledge of the technique was destroyed, and that Saint was executed. It was believed the technique was never left to posterity, but..."

"Why do they die?"

"I don't know. The records say nothing of it."

Adlet considered this. There was no longer any room to doubt that Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom. Rainer's word was solid. The chance of finding any other white-haired, horned girls out there was slim to none.

"*Meow*, I guess I can spill the beans then, eh?" said Hans. All eyes gathered on him. Adlet was about to tell him it wasn't time yet, but he dropped that idea immediately. They didn't need to keep it a secret anymore. Besides, he couldn't stop Hans now.

"What is it?"

"The truth is, that fella from the Dead Host said more. Me, Adlet, and Rolonia have been keepin' that a secret. He said the Black Barrenbloom is a hieroform in the shape of a human: a girl with a horn on 'er forehead, white hair, and frightenin' cold eyes."

"Wha...?" Mora and Chamo were shocked.

But despite the damning revelation, Fremy's expression remained unchanged. "Why were you hiding that?"

"Just ta see meow you'd react. We thought ya might try to hide that yer the Barrenbloom, so we pretended not to know to see how you'd act."

"...I see."

"But we don't need to do that anymeowr. You revealed yerself that yer the Barrenbloom. If ya knew it was you and you was meanin' to use that power to kill us, you'd have never let that cat out of the bag. So it sounds like we can trust ya."

"I understand. I can accept that." Fremy gave a small nod.

Adlet was somewhat relieved, since he'd been just a bit suspicious of her, too. But now that she'd shared her memories with them, he was sure she had no

intention of killing the Six Braves. She hadn't known she was the Black Barrenbloom. Adlet would no longer have to doubt the woman who was so precious to him.

Now it was clear what Adlet would do: He would just find a way to stop the Barrenbloom without letting Fremy die.

"I've always wondered," said Fremy.

"Ameowt what?"

"About why I'm alive. If Tgurneu had sincerely meant to kill me all along, it never would have let me escape. All it would have had to do was shatter my core while I was asleep. It could have poisoned my food or stabbed me in the back without a word. But Tgurneu made a point of explaining the reason it was discarding me, told me it was a lie that they had loved me, and then tried to kill me—even though there was no need to do any of that." Fremy's voice was quiet.

But Adlet could sense sadness in her monotone voice. The despair in it was so deep, she couldn't even cry.

"Tgurneu set up everything. I came to hate fiends and the Evil God, just according to its plan. The plan let me meet up with the Six Braves. And thanks to it, I nearly killed the Braves with the power of the Black Barrenbloom, too. I've been so foolish, I'm disgusted with myself."

A long silence fell. Rolonia, Mora, and Goldof appeared to sympathize with Fremy, as did Dozzu and Nashetania. But Chamo was looking at her with suspicion. And Adlet saw Hans quietly reach for his swords.

"Everyone, listen," Adlet spoke loudly in order to keep Hans in check. "I think it's pretty clear now that the Barrenbloom is Fremy. The question is what we do now. I think we should kill Tgurneu as soon as possible. The Barrenbloom will stop if we kill the one who activated it, and Tgurneu is coming to this temple. We have to seize this chance."

"That's a bad idea," Chamo replied instantly. "We don't know when the crests will disappear. We can't spend our time messing around."

"And..." Goldof spoke, too. "If we fight now...Tgurneu is going to...just run. As

long as the Barrenbloom is here...and alive...Tgurneu...is sure to win. So it'd be pointless...for it to fight now. We'll never kill Tgurneu...as long as Fremy is... alive."

Adlet could see a faint smile on Hans's lips, as if to tell him it was futile to try.

"Chamo feels bad for her, but we're gonna kill Fremy now. We don't have a choice."

Adlet breathed a small sigh. He was desperately trying to maintain a calm front. He had anticipated this would happen. He'd also already considered what to do about it. But he was hesitant, unsure if his idea was even permissible.

Then he silently steeled himself. He'd made up his mind. He would not go back. He *would* protect Fremy. "I understand what you guys are saying. But we can't just kill her. Now that the truth about Fremy is out, there's no longer any need to hide things."

"...What do you mean?"

"There were a lot of people imprisoned in this temple and forced to work. It seems that some of them, like Rainer, tried to leave us information, too. While you guys were deciphering the hieroglyphs, I found some of what they left behind."

Chamo's and Goldof's eyes went wide.

"There was this weird room—I think the fiends were using it for something. There were fiend corpses in there. The moment I entered the room, the floor at my feet shone. The light carved this message that said *It's a trap. Don't kill my daughter* and then disappeared immediately. I searched for the source of the light—but I couldn't find it."

"Is that true?" asked Dozzu.

"You think I'd lie?" Adlet shot back. "I don't know who left that message, how they communicated it to me, or how they kept Tgurneu and the other fiends from noticing. But I did see that message. *Don't kill my daughter* ... I think it might mean Fremy."

This was an utter fabrication. Adlet hadn't found anything in that room with

the bodies, nor any glowing message. Intense guilt weighed on his chest. Though he was doing this to protect Fremy, he was still trying to deceive his allies—and his beloved, too. Was this beyond forgiveness? But now that the words were out of his mouth, he couldn't retract them.

“Once the Black Barrenbloom dies, something that originally seemed like it wasn't a big problem will occur. I think Chamo and Goldof are taking that too lightly. It's true that it's dangerous to leave the Barrenbloom...Fremy alive. But I think it also may be dangerous to kill her. Someone from this temple left us this information to warn us about that.”

Adlet scanned all the faces around him, trying to divine from their expressions if he'd managed to fool them. Rolonia didn't seem to suspect him. Goldof, Mora, and Chamo appeared conflicted, but they weren't looking at Adlet with suspicion. Hans was pacing restlessly as he scratched his head. And Fremy was fixing Adlet with her usual cold, unreadable look.

“I didn't tell you because talking about it would force me to allude to Fremy's identity. I couldn't call Mora over to request she examine the message, either, because I was keeping that a secret from her.”

“Wait a spell,” Mora said, then she closed her eyes and activated her clairvoyance. “The room with the corpses where you found this is about fifty feet above and fifty feet to the east, is that so?”

“I don't know the exact position, but I think that's about right.”

“Based on what you've described so far, the source of that message would have to be a light gem. There are no other hieroforms around, and neither does this phenomenon seem like a fiend's ability. Which one brought forth that message?”

“I just told you. I don't know.”

Mora continued examining from afar for a while. “I'm searching for traces of hieroforms and light gems, but I haven't found anything unusual. This message you saw...where was it coming from?” She seemed baffled.

“If you don't know...then there's no way I could,” Adlet replied. She was finding this suspicious. “Though I don't find it strange that the source is

unknown. The one who left us this information would have to have kept both the fiends and any humans other than the Six Braves from seeing it. If anyone else found it, it would have been erased. It'd be weirder if we did find the source that easily."

Adlet figured he should keep the information he revealed vague, and that it was best not to make clear where that information had come from. If he were to make mistakes in bringing it down to the specifics, his lie could be exposed.

He didn't have to fool them perfectly. If they couldn't be sure he was lying, that was enough. The goal of this lie was to convince his allies it could be dangerous to kill Fremy. As long as he could make them feel that, it would be fine.

"If...even killing Fremy...is dangerous...then the situation...is bad," Goldof said, sweat beading on his forehead.

Chamo was rattled, too. "Did you really see that, Adlet?"

"Of course I did. How the hell can you ask me that?"

Chamo didn't fully believe him. It would probably take one more push to convince her. But still, Adlet felt like the situation was improving. Little by little, they were all beginning to feel that killing Fremy would be risky. If he could persuade them all to kill Tgurneu, then the goal of this lie would be accomplished.

Adlet knew as well as they did just how difficult it would be to kill a commander in this situation. But this was the only way he could think of to protect Fremy from the other Braves.

"We're going to have to take down Tgurneu eventually. And we're not gonna win if we're chicken. But you can relax. The strongest man in the world is here. I swear I'll come up with a plan to beat Tgurneu." Now he would guide them with words. He would make them all think that killing Tgurneu was their only option. This next part would hang on his ability to convince them.

But the moment that thought crossed his mind...

"*Hrmeow*. Strongest man in the world, there's a purrson we can rely on." The voice came from behind him.

A moment later, Adlet felt something cold on the back of his neck. Hans was pressing a blade to it.

“...Hans?”

All, including Adlet, momentarily failed to grasp what was happening.

“Puttin’ yer life on the line to protect the woman ya love. That’s the strongest man in the world fer ya. But you neow, it ain’t good to lie.”

“...Is this some kind of joke, Hans?” said Adlet. He knew this was just a threat. He didn’t sense that Hans would actually kill him. But if Adlet made one wrong move, he was bound to lose an arm, at least. He could sense Hans’s determination in the coolness of the blade.

“If you say yer sorry now, I won’t kill ya. So apologize. Say yer sorry fer lyin’.”

“What are you doing?” Mora interjected. “Stop it, Hans.”

“This naughty brat who won’t say he’s sorry is gonna die right now.”

Adlet couldn’t see from his position, but he could sense that Hans was smiling.

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m not lying.”

“Yeah, you are. I can tell. When ya were meowt investigatin’, I was followin’ ya.”

“...What did you say?” There was no way. Adlet hadn’t sensed him at all. He wondered why Hans would lie about this, knowing he’d be immediately exposed. Adlet looked at Mora. She’d been watching the whole temple with her clairvoyance, so she’d be able to tell that Hans was lying.

But what Mora said next was unexpected. “I thought that was odd, Hans... I didn’t understand why you were following him.”

Had Hans really been tailing him without alerting him that anyone was even present or arousing the slightest hint of suspicion?

“I was watchin’ ya when you went into that room with all the fiend bodies. I didn’t see no light anywhere. After ya left, I tried goin’ inside, but no shinin’ words showed up on the floor.”

“Maybe they just weren’t visible to you.”

“*Hrmeow*. My peepers were open nice and wide. Give it up, Adlet. The cat is long outta the bag.”

Adlet asked, “Why were you trailing me?”

Hans smiled. “I told Mora I wanted to watch ya to see how the enemy acts, ’cause I felt they was after ya, so I’d follow ya and see what happened. But that wasn’t what I was really doin’ it for. I was actually keepin’ an eye on you.”

The others were frozen around Adlet and Hans. They had no opportunity to stop him, and the assassin was acting intense enough that they would believe he would indeed kill him.

“Do ya wanna hear why? I’ve always suspected ya. I figgered you might let Fremy get away, maybe ’cause of yer feelin’s or for some other reason. That’s why I thought, *Why don’t I do a little somethin’ behind the scenes, meow?*”

“You...”

“Ya didn’t seem like you were up to anythin’, so I figgered my guess was off the mark. But I didn’t think you’d pull a fib like this. Good thing I was trailin’ ya.”

Adlet had failed to notice that Fremy hadn’t been the only one under watch—he himself had been surveilled, too. Hans had been oddly willing to go along with Adlet’s suggestion to hide that information about Fremy. So that wasn’t because he trusted Adlet, but because he’d suspected him.

“Please calm down, Hans. Just lower your weapons, please,” Rolonia said, clenching her whip.

“Why? I’m just givin’ this bad kid a little spankin’ for tryin’ to trick us.”

“You don’t know he’s lying. Maybe you just couldn’t see the light. Either way, please get away from Addy.”

“Do ya think my eyes are that bad? Or do ya think it’s me who’s lyin’?”

Rolonia’s protests were in vain now. Chamo, Goldof, Dozzu, and Nashetania were eyeing Adlet with doubt. His chances of pulling off this deception had gradually dropped to a hopeless level.

“Wait a moment. I’ll go investigate the location Adlet described,” Mora said. Then she spun around and sprinted off at full speed. Chamo followed after her, saying that she couldn’t leave Mora alone.

“*Hrmeow*. Adlet, acknowledge that ya lied, already. It’s for the best,” Hans said.

But Adlet couldn’t. If he did, then Fremy would be killed right then. *There’s no way I’m gonna let Fremy die down here*, thought Adlet. She was an important friend. There had to be a way to keep her safe. He was not going to lose the one he loved.

Sensing the blade on his neck all the while, Adlet waited. About fifteen minutes later, Mora and Chamo returned.

“Hans, first, lower your sword. We have to be calm to discuss this,” said Mora. Hans shrugged and backed away from Adlet.

“I picked up and inspected every gem that was in the room Adlet described.”

“So did you find the gem I was talking about?”

“I cannot sense all power imbued into a light stone by just looking at it.”

“Then...?”

“But I’ve understood that you’re likely lying, Adlet.”

Adlet held his breath. “What makes you think that?”

“All the light gems in that room were made by a famed Saint of Light who lived over fifty years ago.”

“So what does that mean?”

“She created many light gems and profited from selling them at a high price, since temples need money. Trade isn’t forbidden to us. Large volumes of her merchandise circulate all around the world. And the gems share a unique characteristic. First off, they’re all made of topaz, and secondly, a single hieroglyph is engraved on the surface of each gem.”

“Wh-what’s topaz?”

“It’s a kind of gem. These were pale-yellowish and cylindrical.”

Adlet, born and raised a peasant, had no way of knowing about different types of gemstones—to say the least of light gems. It was true that when Adlet had searched the room, all the gems he'd found had been yellow. Many of the ones Mora had handed him before were also in that same shape, so he'd believed light gems were just like that.

“My, you weren't aware? The topaz lights made by Tohala are famous, aren't they?” said Nashetania.

I don't know anything about fancy stuff like that , Adlet mentally retorted.

“Currently, it seems highly unlikely that anything but light gems could be the source of those words,” Mora went on. “But Fremy had not yet been born when these were made. And of course, that Saint of Light has never been to the Howling Vilelands, either. 'Tis not impossible to add new effects to an existing hieroform, but it's difficult. I could find no signs of any such activity. The gems in that room could never have projected a glowing message.”

Adlet had not anticipated that his lie would be exposed in such a way.

“Wait. There might have been something else besides the light gems. Someone could have taken them away after Hans and I left.”

“I'll say this one more time: It's unlikely anything other than a light gem could have projected such a message. It's also unthinkable such a thing would have been removed from that room. We're the only ones in this temple. The fiends were all eliminated, and no more have invaded, either. It's impossible.” Mora sighed. “Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to me that you're telling the truth.”

Adlet had already known she would find no proof. The story about the glowing message had been a spur-of-the-moment lie all along. The others clearly didn't trust him.

But the problem was not their suspicion. After hesitating to kill Fremy for a time, now their attitudes were starting to change. Adlet looked at her face. He could tell there was an edge of disappointment in her cold gaze.

“I...I know I saw that glowing message. Even if you can't find any proof, it's a fact.”

That was when Adlet realized. It wasn't disappointment in Fremy's eyes.

It was naked animosity.

What a foolish man. How many times had the thought crossed Fremy's mind because of Adlet? If she tallied the times from the moment they first met, she wouldn't have enough fingers for it.

Without even needing to hear Mora's explanation, Fremy had understood Adlet was lying. She could tell from his face. His agitation was so clear to her, she felt sorry for him. Sometimes, he was sharp, and then suddenly he would be rash and immature in the oddest ways.

"...You really are foolish," Fremy muttered. And he wasn't the only one. She was a fool, too.

Yes, she was indeed. There was surely no greater idiot here than herself. In her eighteen years of life, she had not taken even one single action that was *not* foolish.

Fremy reflected on just how irrational she had been in the past. The first thing to come to mind was the night she'd lost everything, when she'd been betrayed by the family she trusted to love her.

After her loss to Chamo, Fremy had dragged her shredded leg along as she made her way through a meadow. She'd cauterized all her wounds with gunpowder to force-stop the bleeding and prevent a trail of blood that would give away her location. The pain had been almost bad enough to make her pass out.

The allies who'd accompanied her were all dead: the transforming fiend to make Fremy look human, her backup who could generate smoke screens, and the one who could control humans and collected information. Chamo had killed them all.

It was frustrating.

Fremy had worked so hard for Tgurneu, for her family. She'd learned how to wield a gun, trained for battle, and honed her powers as a Saint. But all those days of effort had been in vain in the face of a true genius.

Chamo Rosso. A mutation of a Saint. A born monster. She'd gained the ultimate power without any effort at all. Fremy couldn't stand losing to an

enemy like her.

“...Ngh.” Even as her body twisted in pain, she had continued walking.

It's not over yet, she'd thought. She still had her faithful gun in hand, and the protection charm from her family was still with her. There was a tiny bag in Fremy's pants containing some items that would be nothing but junk to other fiends, but Fremy had carefully kept them on her person at all times.

The tooth White Lizard had given to her. A shard of its shell with the word *loyalty* carved onto it that Red Ant had given her. A tail feather from Piercing Bird. A part of antenna her mother had given her. And the whistle Fremy used to call her dog.

Even after losing to Chamo, and injured as she was, she had made sure not to lose her treasures during her flight, because she believed her bonds with her family would bring about her victory. *As long as I still have these charms—as long as my bonds with my family are true—I can still fight. I swear I'll win next time*, Fremy had thought as she walked on.

But that still didn't dispel her frustration. She felt so sorry for them all, she couldn't stand it.

She had boldly declared to her family and the other fiends that she would be sure to win. She had made all the fiends promise that if she beat Chamo, they would never call her a half-breed ever again and swear not to bully her family. As for her family, she'd told them, “You don't have to worry, because no one will hurt you anymore.”

They would be so disappointed in her. Tgurneu and the other fiends would laugh. That was the most painful thing of all. Still unable to come up with a way to apologize, Fremy had arrived at the familiar nest in a cave in the grasslands. Inside the cave, Fremy had been greeted by an unexpected sight: Tgurneu was inside their roost. How many years had it been since she had last seen their commander?

“I'm sorry. I've failed you, and Chamo Rosso has...,” Fremy had apologized.

Tgurneu had scolded her. “You forgot your greeting.”

“Good evening, Commander Tgurneu. There's a nice moon out tonight.”

Tgurneu sighed. That was when Fremy had realized her family was there, behind the leader. White Lizard and Piercing Bird had accompanied Fremy in a number of her battles, backing her up. But it was unusual to see her mother and Red Ant there, too. This was probably the first time they had ever left the Howling Vilelands.

“Mother, Red Ant, you’re here. I’m glad, but... I’m sorry. I didn’t...” Fremy had thought the two must have come to hear good news. It stung that she didn’t have any for them.

“So I took you under my wing and put so much effort into your care, and this is the result? Not only have you returned after a loss, you forgot your greetings. Disappointing, Fremy.” It had seemed Tgurneu already knew about her defeat. Fremy had cringed as she listened to the reprimand. It was the law of fiends that the useless be killed. She’d trembled, afraid of death.

“I’m vëry sorry, Commander Tgurneu,” Red Ant had said.

Piercing Bird had apologized, too. “We regret...that this was bënd our capabilities.”

Fremy didn’t think it was their fault. Red Ant had always helped out with Fremy’s combat training. Piercing Bird had worked hard at gathering information in the human world. This loss had been her own doing.

“Oh, Fremy. Why häs such a useless creature come back alive? Did you think we would wänt a loser to return alive?” her mother had said. Fremy bit her lip. She was a strict mother, but this was the first time she had used such harsh language with Fremy.

“I hadn’t thought you were súch a weak half-breed. I’m so disáppointed in you,” White Lizard had said. *Half-breed* was the word that the other fiends called Fremy. Her family had never uttered it before, not even once—but her failure was so egregious that White Lizard used it.

“It’s not any of your faults,” Tgurneu had said. “Oh no, you all did well. I mean, you succeeded in getting this defective merchandise to function, at least. It does require love or whatnot to operate, after all.”

“We are gratefúl for your praise. But the fact of the mätter is that we were

unable to show you results...”

“That’s true. And you will be dealt with.”

Without thinking, Fremy had pleaded, “Commander Tgurneu, please only punish me...my family did well for me.”

But immediately, a cutting reprimand had flown at her from behind. “Silence, half-breed! Don’t you open that filthy mouth!” It had been White Lizard.

Have I angered my family that much? Fremy had thought. So much that they would say the word she never wanted to hear—*half-breed*—twice.

“This is nauseating. What is this *please only punish me* nonsense? Even the half-breed’s words are useless.” That time, it had been Piercing Bird. Even Piercing Bird, the kindest of her family, had called her that name again.

“I thought you understood, Piercing Bird—that the half-breed is just as vile as you’d expect a half-breed to be.”

Fremy had begun to find this strange. *Is this really my family?* They were acting just like all the other fiends, who despised her. This had to be a dream or something. Or was this Cargikk’s followers impersonating Tgurneu and her family?

When Tgurneu spoke next, Fremy had doubted her ears. “I release you and your subordinates from your mission. There is no longer any need for you to raise Fremy. This is the end of your loving act with her, too.”

What had Tgurneu meant, *act* ? Was that some slip of the tongue? Her family had always cared for her. What had been an act?

“Oh, that’s a relief. I don’t have to involve myself with this dirty half-breed anymore.”

Fremy had noticed that the ground at her feet was wavering. She couldn’t accept the events unfolding before her eyes as reality.

“It was a tough mission, being with that for the past eighteen years.”

“Was it? Thank you for your hard work,” Tgurneu had said.

“Yes, Commander. This half-breed, repulsively enough, was affectionate

toward us. It was the most disgusting...”

“It must have been difficult. But it’s over now.”

It’s a lie, Fremy had thought. Her family had loved her—that was why she’d managed to survive. It couldn’t possibly be a lie.

“You may kill her. Vent all your built-up resentment,” Tgurneu had said, and Fremy’s family attacked her all at once.

“It’s a lie.” Fremy hadn’t dodged or blocked. Piercing Bird’s beak had plunged into her, and Red Ant’s pincers had bitten into her injured leg.

“It’s a lie. It’s a lie. It’s got to be a lie!” Fremy had screamed and shaken off the two fiends, then dashed out of her home.

Fremy couldn’t recall how she had escaped. All she remembered was the words of the family members she’d trusted and the despair swallowing her heart.

“Running, half-breed?”

“You won’t even obey Cómmander Tgurneu’s orders?”

It was Fremy’s family that had enabled her to become strong. She’d fought for the sake of protecting them. It was their support that had enabled her to withstand day after day of hell. It had all been because she’d loved them.

“Did you think we actually loved you?”

“A creature like you.”

Fremy had wanted to protect them all. She had believed that if she could become strong, she could do that. But her entire family had found even that love to be disgusting.

“Monstér.”

“If you’re going to be useless as well as a monster, you might as well just die already.”

What had she been fighting for? What had she been trying to get stronger for? And what should she do now? Still completely confused, Fremy had dashed into a thicket. She was still holding her wounds closed when Red Ant and

Piercing Bird found her.

“Listen, Red Ant, Piercing Bird, tell me just one thing.”

The two had approached her slowly, as if even responding was repulsive to them.

“This is Commander Tgurneu’s plot, right? He gave you the order to make me suffer, right?” This was the one and only final hope left to her: that for some inexplicable reason, Tgurneu had required this to happen and her family had just been forced into obeying.

Suddenly, Fremy had looked into the distance. Tgurneu was looking down upon Fremy and her family, and seemed to be smiling. “Right?” Fremy had asked.

“You’re all so funny,” Tgurneu had said to Red Ant and Piercing Bird. “She still believes you all love her. Half-breeds are curious creatures.”

Fremy had heard Red Ant and Piercing Bird laughing—ridiculing her plight and her emotions. In that moment, Fremy had been certain: It was the truth. They had just been pretending to love her. “...You just laughed, didn’t you?”

Red Ant and Piercing Bird had come to attack her, and Tgurneu as well.

“You laughed. You laughed at me.” Fremy had manifested a bomb in her hand and stuck it to Piercing Bird’s face. Dodging Red Ant’s attack, Fremy had raised her gun.

The sounds of the family she had loved snickering at her, and then their final gasps engraved themselves in Fremy’s ears. They still hadn’t left, even now.

With a roar, Fremy had attacked Tgurneu. She didn’t remember a thing after that.

Fremy figured you could look all over the world and never find anyone as foolish as her.

She had dedicated herself to her family so desperately without ever realizing that they hadn’t loved her. She had wasted effort upon worthless effort. She’d hated humans she’d had no reason to hate and killed Brave candidates she’d had no need to kill. That alone would have made her a hopeless fool. But her

true folly had come after that.

Fremy had sworn revenge against Tgurneu and returned to the Howling Vilelands. She had met up with the Six Braves and fought together with them—without ever noticing that this was all a part of Tgurneu’s plan.

It had all been played out as the commander wished. Everything about her life had been for Tgurneu, all of it. She had to be the only fool in the world whose life had entirely been in service of the very enemy she had sworn vengeance against.

“Mora, just because there wasn’t a light gem doesn’t mean I’m lying,” said Adlet.

Mora countered him. “I searched to see if there were any other hieroforms, but I found none. There are no other Saints here, and I doubt that message could have originated from a fiend’s powers, either.”

“But...!” Adlet continued to insist on the existence of a luminous message.

Fremy wasn’t listening anymore. It wasn’t worth it. “You can stop. I’ve had enough,” she said coldly.

“Hey, you can’t be okay with dying now, are you?”

“So what if I am?”

“Are you kidding me? There’s no way I’ll let you do that. I know it’d be dangerous to let you die. Or are you going to tell me you can’t trust me anymore?”

“...I won’t say that. Relax.” As Fremy replied, she put her hand into her pocket and pulled out a small scrap of wood, gently squeezing it. It was one of the protection charms her family had given to her once—the whistle she’d used to call her dog. She had blown it every day when it was time for his meals. The dog would loiter near her family, and Fremy’s heart always felt most at ease when it would leap on her, tail wagging.

She had thrown away all the other mementos from her family. She’d smashed them, burned them up with gunpowder, and kicked the remaining ashes to the wind. The dog whistle was the only thing she had never thrown away. She

understood that she was never going to see him again, but she had still held on to this one keepsake anyway. She'd thought that once she defeated the Evil God and completed her revenge, she would call her dog with this whistle. She'd wanted to make sure it was alive and healthy before she died, though she'd known that was a hopeless wish.

Fremy dropped it on the ground and then quietly crushed it under her foot. It broke easily with a tiny cracking sound. The others present all looked confused, not understanding what she'd just done.

"I'm not going to say *I won't mind dying*," said Fremy. "I've made up my mind to die right this minute. No matter what you say, I'm going to kill myself now."

Adlet's expression was despairing, and Rolonia was shaking her head. But Fremy's heart was already settled.

Tgurneu had to be glad she was still alive. As long as Fremy was alive, the fiend had to be gloating, figuring its own defeat was impossible. Fremy couldn't handle that. She couldn't handle that for a single minute, even a second.

They hadn't uncovered every part of Tgurneu's plot, but it was clear that her own death would cause a large part of it to collapse. She would tear apart the scheme it had been working away at for so many years. That was good enough as her revenge. She wouldn't be able to follow through fully, but at the very least, she could die satisfied.

"Oh, so you're gonna die...see ya. Leave the rest to Chamo," Chamo said, sounding slightly pained. Mora and Goldof were looking at the ground, as if mourning her death. Even Nashetania and Dozzu were giving her sad looks.

This is surprising, thought Fremy. *I thought they would be a little happier about this.*

"No." Adlet approached her. "How can you say that? Don't you want to live? Why won't you say you want to live?" Adlet reached out to her. But a split-second later, the sound of a gunshot rang out through the narrow hallway. If Adlet hadn't jerked around to avoid it, the bullet would have pierced his shoulder.

"If you get near me, I'll shoot." Fremy instantly loaded her next bullet and

leveled her aim at Adlet's stomach. "I won't let you protect me."

In disbelief, Adlet looked at Fremy and the gun pointed directly at him.

Meanwhile, Tgurneu's forces were proceeding toward the Temple of Fate. They'd already crossed the plains, and the Fainting Mountains were right ahead. Tgurneu, in the form of a wolf-fiend, was not walking on its own feet but rather lounging atop a turtle-fiend.

"The stars are so pretty tonight," said Tgurneu. Specialist number two, who could be described as its aide, was silent beside it.

"What's wrong?" asked Tgurneu.

"<...I still can't help but worry about the Black Barrenbloom girl.>" Number two spoke in a code that only it and Tgurneu understood. The existence of the hieroform was kept a secret from the majority of the fiends. "<I understand that everything is proceeding according to plan. But I worry that even so, something unforeseen may occur...>"

"<You don't get it.>" Tgurneu replied in the code. Number two was killing the fun. "<Nobody can prevent every single unforeseen eventuality. Rather, when dealing with any matter, it should be assumed that the unforeseen will certainly happen.>"

"<Büt...>" Number two continued to argue. It was the one fiend allowed to present its opinions to Tgurneu.

"<If it happens, it happens, and so what? That's exactly when it's the seventh's time to shine. Our plant has been puttering along quite thoughtlessly so far. We've got to get some return on this investment or there will have been no point.>" Tgurneu smiled. "<It will be fine, no matter what happens. I trust the seventh enough to resolve everything for us, you know.>"

Meanwhile, specialist number thirty was eavesdropping on the Six Braves' conversation with its full-body hearing.

"...What do we do, number thirty?" asked number fourteen.

"I still haven't reached a decision, either," number thirty replied. The two fiends spoke to each other in voices so quiet, Mora couldn't hear.

They weren't informed on even a fraction of Tgurneu's plans. But if Fremy was the Black Barrenbloom, and if her death meant Tgurneu's forces would lose, then they had to act immediately. But if this was a trap to make the Braves kill Fremy, or if Tgurneu had some other goal, then the pair could end up ruining Tgurneu's plans.

The bulk of the forces under Tgurneu's command were just so far away, and there had been no sign that number two, whose role was relaying information about the most important missions, would come. Still unable to make up their minds, the two fiends continued to wait in the temple labyrinth.

A little while later, they would receive an order. A seventh Brave with a fake crest who had infiltrated the group would give them a mission to fulfill. The seventh would order them to kill Fremy Speeddraw— And to eliminate Adlet Mayer, who stood in the way of that goal.

Chapter 3
Suspensions
Rekindled



Chapter 3

Suspicious Rekindled

Fremy had no reservations about dying. She actually felt relieved, now that her demise was decided. The reality that she didn't have to live anymore lifted a weight off her shoulders. Ever since that day six months earlier when she had lost everything, her life had been nothing but a burden.

Once again, Fremy reflected on the past.

She didn't remember how she'd fought with Tgurneu. When she'd come to, she'd been walking along a wasteland, battered and in rags, holding nothing but an empty gun and the charms that had been tucked into her clothing.

I won't forgive you. I'll kill you. All that she remembered was mindlessly muttering those words.

Before, a transforming fiend with the power to disguise Fremy as a human had been accompanying her. She'd also had the support of the fiends who lurked undercover in the human world. But they were gone now. So when the humans saw a horned girl, they called her a monster and attacked her. After running from fiends, now it was her turn to run from humans.

Fremy had thought many times about dying. She no longer had any place to return to, and no reason to live, either. She believed her only peace would be in death. She'd attempted to expose herself to the humans' blades. She had also once put a bomb to her head, where her core was and tried to detonate it. But the split-second before she could do these things, she'd changed her mind and lived on. Every time Fremy tried to throw away her life, Tgurneu's face floated up in her mind. She felt as though she could see the fiend sneering at her. *"It was a bother that you let Fremy escape, but at least she killed herself for us."* She had the feeling Tgurneu would say such things about her.

As Fremy wandered the human world, she'd tried to analyze Tgurneu. Why had it made her family pretend to love her? If it hadn't made her family pretend to love her, she wouldn't have suffered. If she had lived without ever knowing love, then she surely would have been able to die without any hesitation. But

Tgurneu had taught her love and then betrayed it.

That was when she finally understood. Tgurneu had clearly enjoyed seeing Fremy suffer from the loss of that love. It was clear it had given its orders for the sake of its own amusement.

She couldn't forgive Tgurneu. She had to kill it and pay it back for everything it had done. She had to make it experience the ultimate suffering for a fiend: the defeat of the Evil God. She had to, or she couldn't rest in peace.

In order to conceal herself in the human world, Fremy had broken off her horn. She'd sneaked into a blacksmith's workshop in the middle of the night to steal lead for forging bullets, too. Once she'd gathered some other equipment for herself, she waited for her revenge. She had made up her mind: She would take advantage of the battle of the Six Braves to kill Tgurneu.

Fremy did resemble a human girl, more or less. She knew that in the human world, girls received comparatively more kindness, and it was easy for them to get sympathy. Some came to her with a desire for her money or her body, but she could turn the tables on that sort with her bare hands.

If word had gotten out that Fremy was the Brave-killer, the whole world would have been after her. But for some reason, there was no description of her appearance on her warrant, so few people were on her trail.

It wasn't difficult at all to go stealth in the human world. But this only lasted as long as no one found out she was a fiend. She hid the scar from her horn, the proof of her origins, by wrapping cloth around it. Her different-colored eyes drew far too much attention, so she covered one with an eye patch. But still, the cloth would come loose sometimes, and she would be found out. And each time, people fled in fear, only to come back later to attack her in armed groups.

If Fremy was to fight, she would kill them. Even if she held back with them, she might give them severe, lifelong injuries. Every time she was attacked, she had no choice but to run. She had spent a long time training, received the power of a Spirit, and fought with Brave candidates. Attacks from regular humans would not injure her. The only thing they could hurt was her heart.

After Tgurneu cut her off, Fremy didn't want to kill any more people. She didn't have the heart to hate humans for no reason the way other fiends did.

She didn't want to eat them. There was no reason to fight them.

She told people again and again that she wanted them to leave her alone. She also tried to convince them that she didn't want to fight. She even laid down her weapons to show them that she was surrendering. But none would believe her, and they never relented.

There was only one reason for this: because she was a fiend. Fremy realized that a girl born of a human and a fiend had no place to go.

Thinking about it now, she realized she should have killed herself then. If she had died, she would have accomplished her revenge against Tgurneu.

It had been about ten days before the Evil God's awakening when Fremy, entirely exhausted from running hither and thither, left a village in order to hide in a forest that appeared devoid of human habitation. Some humans had still found Fremy there and addressed her kindly. It was an old couple, hunters who lived near the mountains. Fremy had been seeking a safe place and a warm bed, and the couple had welcomed her.

Fremy had believed she could trust these people. She'd assumed they would let her rest there until the Evil God awoke and the Six Braves showed up. Having received their warm hospitality, Fremy had even wanted to defeat the Evil God for their sakes.

One night, Fremy had revealed her identity to them. She'd removed her eye patch and shown them the scar from her horn. Then she had told them about everything that had happened to her, hiding nothing. Telling them over and over that it was all true, she'd felt that the old couple believed her.

But then the next morning, she'd noticed that the breakfast they served to her tasted a little off. She could tell there was poison in it, the kind they used to kill beasts. Without a word, Fremy had stood from her seat, packed up her bags, and left the mountain hut where that old couple lived. No anger or sadness welled within her, only exasperation at her own foolishness.

The couple had watched in fear as Fremy left.

The final words Fremy had exchanged with her family rose in her mind then, the curses from the ones she had loved when they had disclosed just how

agonizing it had been to pretend to love her. Fremy had never felt animosity toward her family or toward that old couple. She had always tried to care for them. She had always wanted to devote herself to them. But that didn't matter. Humans and fiends both would hate her just because she was there. She was a monster, and no one would love her. She was a monster, and no one would accept her. Even if some might pretend to love her, they never actually would. Even if she loved someone, that love would never be accepted. The truth had sunk deep into her flesh and bones.

Fremy cursed her fate as a child born between human and fiend. She had wished for death. She had thought about how she could just be at ease if only she could die. But each time, right when she was about to choose death, her memories of Tgurneu got in the way. As long as it was alive, as long as her revenge lay unfulfilled, Fremy wouldn't even be allowed to die.

When the Crest of the Six Flowers had appeared on her body, she'd doubted her eyes. She didn't understand the reason she'd been chosen, either. After some time, she recalled that after she had killed Athlay, Saint of Ice, she had fought with some pursuers. On the way, she had run into one of those coliseums for displaying your power to the Spirit of Fate and defeated some enemies inside. Thinking about it now, she realized that this was another part of Tgurneu's plan to lure her into the Howling Vilelands so she could convene with the Braves of the Six Flowers. But at that time, she hadn't figured out what Tgurneu's plan was. Bewildered as she had been by her fate, Fremy had set off for the Howling Vilelands.

And now, Fremy was pointing her gun at Adlet. Finally, she could relax and find death—if she could just eliminate the last obstacle remaining.

Fremy had her gun trained on the middle of his stomach; of all the places on the body, a shot there would be the hardest for him to avoid. It could even kill him. Adlet sensed that if he tried to stop her, she really would try to end his life.

Why would she go that far just to die? Adlet couldn't understand it. "If you're gonna shoot, then do it. No matter what you do to me, I'm not gonna let you kill yourself."

"...I see."

Right as Adlet was about to leap on Fremy, a hand came in from the side to grab his shoulder. It was Hans's. His grip was hard enough to make Adlet's bones creak—surprising, given his thin frame. “I'll hold 'im back. You can rest in peace.”

“Thank you.” Fremy's gun turned away from Adlet, nearing her own head.

But someone else stopped her hand in Adlet's place—Rolonia stood in front of Fremy and grabbed both her arms.

“Wait, please! You can't die!” Rolonia's arms trembled. It took all the strength in her body to hold Fremy back.

“Think about this calmly, Rolonia. As long as I'm alive, the Braves have no chance of winning,” Fremy said, letting just a bit of anger slip into her voice.

“Addy just told us, right? ‘It's a trap. Don't kill my daughter.’”

“He just made that up.”

“Addy isn't a liar! ...Well, he does lie sometimes, but he wouldn't if it would put everyone in danger. It's just that Hans couldn't see it, and Lady Mora couldn't find the source.”

Rolonia's support gave Adlet a little heartache. But he could never let that show on his face.

“Adlet's a liar,” Chamo asserted coldly, touching her foxtail to her face. “Move it, moo-head. Fremy's gonna die now. Chamo feels sorry for her, but we've got no choice.”

“No. I won't move.” Rolonia would not budge.

“Even if it is true that Adlet saw a message, we have no proof that it's dangerous to let Fremy die.” Dozzu was the next to speak. “And that message could be fake information Tgurneu left here to prevent her death. In fact, that seems the more likely answer. I highly doubt Tgurneu, of all people, would overlook such an important clue.”

“B-but...” Even then, Rolonia did not release Fremy's arms. Adlet tried to shake off Hans's grip. But the one hand restraining him was enough to keep him from moving at all.

“Wait...I thought...we just talked about this...” Goldof spoke next. “The seventh crest...was made...by the Saint of the Single Flower. Killing the...one who holds it...could hurt us.”

Still grasping Adlet’s shoulder, Hans replied, “I doubt Fremy’s the seventh. If she was a traitor workin’ under Tgurneu’s orders, she wouldn’t have confessed to us that she’s the Barrenbloom. Her story ’bout Tgurneu and her family betrayin’ her is probably true, too.”

“...All right. Then...” Goldof stopped trying to put a halt to it. He approved of Fremy’s death, too.

“There’s something wrong with all of you! It’s dangerous to kill Fremy! Killing Tgurneu is the only option left!”

“Could you be quiet, you liar?” said Chamo.

Watching, Dozzu sighed. “This is dangerous. For our part, as members of this alliance, we would like to avoid internal discord.”

“No need to worry ’bout that. Fremy will kill ’erself now, and then it’ll be over.”

“No. I’m not letting Fremy die,” insisted Adlet. “All of us together are going to go beat Tgurneu.”

“...Whatever the case, we will not take part in your party’s decision-making. All you Braves should make that judgment as a group.” Dozzu and Nashetania backed away from the six a bit, indicating that they would not interfere.

“Rolonia...let go...of Fremy,” Goldof said, approaching Rolonia.

That was when Adlet made up his mind. He couldn’t afford to take the high road anymore. He reached out to a string that hung out of his clothing, and Hans instantly released his shoulder in anticipation of the tear bomb underneath. But Adlet had anticipated that. He didn’t actually pull the string, but rather turned around and kicked into Hans’s gut with his toes.

“N...gh...”

Adlet had kicked as hard as he could. That would stop even Hans, for a little bit.

Adlet stepped toward Fremy and pulled a paralysis needle from a pouch at his waist in a flash. He would stop her from killing herself—by force, if necessary. He was left with no other options. First, he would paralyze her and subdue her, and then he had to run away with her in his arms before Hans or Chamo could kill her. Adlet wasn't thinking about what would come after. Right now, this was his only option.

"Adlet!" Goldof moved in attempt to stop him, and Chamo thrust her foxtail down her throat. But Adlet had moved so decisively that they were too slow.

The first order of business was to ensure that Fremy couldn't move. Adlet was ready to throw a paralyzing needle at Fremy's exposed stomach, but one heartbeat later, a shock ran through his back, and he lost his balance and fell onto the stone floor. On the ground, he finally understood what had hit him. Hans had thrown his sword at Adlet, hilt-first, from behind.

The red-haired boy rolled and threw his needle in one motion. It hit Fremy's torso.

"!" The effects were instant. The moment it hit Fremy, she stopped moving. Her arms went slack under Rolonia's hands.

"Stop, Adlet!" Goldof threw himself over Adlet on the ground.

Hans had recovered from Adlet's powerful kick and drew both his swords. He was right about to slice at Fremy when Mora came in and grabbed him.

"What the *meow* are ya doin'?!"

"Calm down!" said Mora. "Stop fighting with your allies!"

Once the needle hit Fremy, she fell like a puppet with cut strings. Watching her, Adlet yelled, "Rolonia! Grab Fremy and run!"

At the exact same moment, Hans yelled, "Chamo! Kill Fremy!" Chamo didn't need to be told; she'd already begun. The slave-fiends she'd vomited up charged at the gunslinger. Reacting to Adlet's cry, Rolonia swiped her whip horizontally to push the slave-fiends back.

"Run, Rolonia! Hurry!" Adlet shouted, right as Goldof pushed him to the ground. Adlet desperately wrenched his left arm free to pull a smoke bomb

from a waist pouch and throw it. It exploded in the center of the group of slave-fiends.

The narrow hallway of the labyrinth was now choked with smoke. Inside the smoke screen, Adlet could just barely see Rolonia scooping up Fremy and dashing off into the labyrinth, Chamo's slave-fiends in pursuit.

"You fools! All of you, stop! Stop fighting among yourselves!" Nobody was listening to Mora.

When the smoke screen finally cleared, Chamo, Rolonia, and Fremy were gone. Goldof was holding down Adlet while Mora was restraining Hans.

"...This is dangerous. We can't simply let Chamo and the others go," Nashetania said as she patted dust off herself. Then she drew her slim sword and dashed into the labyrinth after the others.

"Wait! Nashetania! Who said you could run off?!" Mora yelled. Without so much as a glance behind her, Nashetania disappeared around a corner.

"Please don't worry. I'm sure she just went to stop the fight. I doubt she would do anything that would cause trouble for the Braves," said Dozzu.

"What a disaster... Adlet, you've been so very foolish." Mora shot him a reproachful look.

Goldof, still holding Adlet down, looked angry, too.

But if he hadn't paralyzed Fremy, she would have killed herself. And if he hadn't told Rolonia to run, she would have been killed. Adlet didn't regret what he'd done one bit.

The problem was what came next. The paralysis wouldn't last long. He didn't know how far Rolonia could keep running. After the drug wore off, how would he protect Fremy? Adlet couldn't think of anything.

"Haah, haah, haah..."

Panting, Rolonia hurried through the labyrinth. Fremy, on her shoulder, was struggling fiercely to move her body, but she couldn't budge a single finger. It seemed Adlet had used quite a powerful toxin.

Fremy tried to manifest gunpowder in her hand. She meant to create a bomb

that would kill herself without hitting Rolonia. But the needle affected not just her body, but her mind, too. She couldn't concentrate, and the bomb wouldn't take shape. *He got me* , Fremy thought. Distracted by Rolonia, she hadn't been paying attention to Adlet. She had underestimated his abilities.

"I have to...I have to run, um, which way...?" Rolonia muttered. It had to be tough, running with Fremy slung over her shoulder. Either due to integrity or instinct, Rolonia was even carrying the gun. Unsure where to go, Rolonia just kept on turning corners and going up and down stairs. It was likely only luck that kept her from hitting any dead ends.

The slave-fiends cries hounded Rolonia from behind. Fremy could hear Chamo's angry yells in the distance with them. "Moo-head! If you don't stop, Chamo's gonna kill you!"

"Ahhhh! Wh-wh-what do I do?"

The poor thing , thought Fremy. The cowardly girl clearly couldn't withstand having Chamo on her trail. Fremy knew quite intimately just how frightening the child could be when she was chasing someone down.

But this wasn't the time to be feeling sorry for Rolonia. Fremy had to escape from her grasp somehow. Though even so, her body wouldn't move at all.

"Which way should I go, Lady Mora?! Lady Mora, please reply! Lady Mora!" Rolonia was yelling. But the mountain echo did not reply.

Rolonia came to a fork in the path. Multiple slave-fiends approached from either branch. It appeared Chamo had given her minions instructions to spread out and encircle Rolonia.

"I-I'm sorry, all of you!" Rolonia swung her whip and struck the slave-fiends. In the narrow hallways of the labyrinth, they couldn't attack her all at once. With her power to manipulate blood, she wrung out the fluids of the slave-fiends to defeat them. The ones that remained cried out to tell Chamo of Rolonia's position.

"Fremy...please don't worry. I won't let you die," Rolonia reassured her, running again.

Gradually, both the roars of the fiends and the sound of Chamo's voice grew

distant. Chamo may have gotten lost on all the flights of stairs.

What is she doing? Fremy wondered, irritated. *Hans and Goldof, too. And they call themselves Braves of the Six Flowers?*

“Fremy,” Rolonia said as she stopped, catching her breath. “I understand that you believe you have to die for us and for the world. But I hate that idea. You can’t abandon your friends. You have to protect one another to the very end. If you don’t, you’ll end up losing even winnable battles. Besides...”

Past a crossroads, there were more signs of slave-fiends. Rolonia stopped and hid in the shadow of a pillar. She watched Chamo’s fiends pass by in a different direction, then ran off in the direction they had come from.

“Addy needs you. Without you, he won’t be able to fight anymore. His friends are dead, the people from his home village are gone, and you’re all he has left. Please understand that.” As Rolonia hid, she desperately kept trying to convince Fremy. “Please trust Addy. He can accomplish anything, if it’s to protect you. I know he can beat Tgurneu, too.”

The poor girl , Fremy thought.

She hadn’t yet realized how Adlet really felt—or who Adlet truly was.

“Goldof, move. I have to heal Adlet.” Mora released Hans and came to Adlet’s side, forcing Goldof off to free the boy. Hans rubbed his aching stomach as he eyed the redhead.

“He only hit me with the hilt of his sword. I don’t need healing.” Adlet pushed aside Mora’s hand and stood.

That was when something on the ground caught Adlet’s eye, a piece of a broken toy, perhaps. It was the object Fremy had earlier pulled out of her clothing and crushed.

Adlet picked it up. It was a wooden flute, broken in two, and it looked a lot like the one he used for calling fiends. A hunch told him it was a dog whistle.

He also immediately realized its purpose, and why she had carried it around. *Oh, Fremy, you really did still want to see your dog, didn’t you?* “What are you doing?” Adlet muttered. *How are you going to call your dog if you’ve broken it?*

I only just swore I'd make sure you see your dog again. I can't fulfill that promise like this.

But I can still fix it , he thought, tucking the dog whistle into one of his waist pouches.

"What do we do now?" said Mora.

"Obviously, we stop Chamo," said Adlet. "We stop Fremy from killing herself. What other option is there? Use your mountain echo to tell Chamo she can't kill Fremy."

"...I already did. But she won't lend her ear to me. She shouted at me. 'Back off, Auntie.'"

"Damn it!" Adlet tried to run off into the labyrinth after Chamo.

But before he could, Goldof blocked his way. "...I can't...let you go."

Adlet was about to say *Move* . He figured he'd make his way through, even if he had to knock Goldof down to do it. But in the next moment, Adlet found his mouth couldn't move. It was like it had frozen up. Goosebumps ran down his back, as if ice was touching it.

"*Hrmeow.*" A funny-sounding noise echoed through the hallway. Hans had picked up the sword he'd thrown and was spinning it around as he watched Adlet. That action alone was enough to prevent the young Brave from taking even one step forward.

It was a desire to kill. Only trained and experienced warriors could sense it. And with just will alone, Hans had frozen Adlet in place. He even overwhelmed Mora, Goldof, and Dozzu.

When Hans had held his blade to Adlet's neck before, it had ultimately been a mere threat. But now Hans fully intended to kill him.

"...Hans, what are you doing?" Cold sweat dripped from Adlet's cheek. Back in the Phantasmal Barrier, he had fought with Hans once before. But even then, he hadn't felt this terrified. It had to mean that Hans was serious. Back then, the assassin had still been going easy on him.

"*Meow-hee!*" Hans laughed. It sounded as if he was enjoying this with every

bone in his body. Adlet was well aware what brought that sort of laughter from him.

“...I’m real glad, Adlet. I think I’d like to have a little toast. Do ya understand why?”

“I don’t care.”

“I neow it’s a bad habit of mine. But ya can’t change yer nature. Fightin’ the strong is jus’ so much fun to me.”

“So what?”

“Ya might be surprised to hear this, but I think yer pretty good. I’ve always made fun of ya, but secretly, I always knew mew was the toughest among us. I think yer better’n Chamo, Fremy, or Goldof.”

“Yeah. ’Cause I’m the strongest man in the world,” Adlet shot back, albeit weakly.

“That’s why I’m glad yer the seventh.”

“...What?”

“Tgurneu is a nice fella. Neow one else would be givin’ me such a darn fine present. Lettin’ me fight ya to the death, fer real? I can’t resist.”

Rolonia held Fremy and hid in a corner of the hallway. Fremy tried to create gunpowder in her hand, but it still wasn’t working. She wanted to run, but her body wouldn’t move.

“Moo-head! Where are you?! Chamo knows you’re there!” Her voice echoed in the labyrinth. “Say something, Fremy! Chamo’s gonna kill you, ’kay? You won’t suffer!” But even though Fremy could hear it, she made no sound.

Right then, they heard a few more fiends approaching. Rolonia searched for a different hiding spot, then shifted toward it. The moment she turned the corner, a slave-fiend found her, and its roar immediately reverberated through the labyrinth. Fremy could sense the slave-fiends in the area heading toward them. Rolonia started running, warding off the pursuers with her whip.

They found someone ahead. Rolonia yelped and then stopped.

“Oh, I finally found you.”

It was Nashetania. When she saw a slave-fiend chasing Rolonia, she drew her sword with her one arm and extended its blade to stab through its face. “There are fewer in this direction. Come on, hurry,” she said, indicating the direction with the tip of her sword.

Rolonia was temporarily flustered and confused, but eventually, she realized it was the only open path. “What are you here for?”

“I came to protect you, Rolonia—worst case, Chamo might well end up killing you, too.”

“Y-you don’t mean to kill Fremy...?” asked Rolonia.

Nashetania giggled. “Hardly. If I were to lay a hand on her, Adlet would kill me, wouldn’t he? That would be rather frightening.” Relieved, Rolonia let Nashetania join them in their flight.

This is bad, thought Fremy. With both Rolonia and Nashetania against her, even Chamo would have a hard time killing Fremy. Her body still wouldn’t move, and neither could she estimate when the paralysis would wear off.

“Do you believe Addy?”

“I can’t. But I also can’t be quite certain that he’s lying, either. I’m deferring judgment.”

While listening in on their conversation, Fremy wondered if Nashetania hadn’t figured it out, or if she was just choosing to say nothing...

...about how Adlet was the seventh.

“...If you’ve gotta joke around, just stick to the cat stuff,” Adlet shot back as he raised his sword, though he did understand that this was neither a joke nor a trick to get information out of him.

“I ain’t joking. I’ll say it one meowr time. Yer the seventh.”

Adlet had figured he’d be suspected no matter what. Hans had indeed witnessed him lying and had never entirely trusted him anyway. But Hans couldn’t have the proof necessary to be sure about this.

“This isn’t like you. You’ve made up your mind that I’m the seventh just because I lied? I thought you were more careful than that. Just so you know, I’m not lying, and I’m not the seventh.”

Instead of replying, Hans sneered.

A line of sweat dripped from Adlet’s cheek. “Stop stirring the pot. Right now, we’ve got to stop Chamo, make Fremy give up on killing herself, and defeat Tgurneu. We’ve got no more time.”

“He’s exactly right, Hans.” Mora had been overwhelmed by Hans’s murderous aura, but she finally stepped in to stop the fight. “We can’t say for certain that Adlet is lying. Besides, even if he is, that’s no proof he’s the seventh. He might have lied to prevent an ally’s death.”

“...Oh, *meow*. So ya won’t get it unless I spell it meowt fer ya? I guess this means I can’t kill ’im until I’ve convinced ya, Mora.” Hans shrugged. “Well, frankly speakin’, ’til just a minute ago, I thought that meowbe ya weren’t the one, too, Adlet, since I was gettin’ along so well with ya. I’m gettin’ soft. I’m a failure as an assassin.”

Adlet had no idea which part of this man could be considered soft.

“Hans,” said Dozzu, “I suspect Adlet as well, but I believe it’s rash to conclude he’s the seventh based on that one lie.”

“I agree. I can’t...approve of this...without...real proof.”

“I didn’t come to this conclusion just ’cause he lied,” said Hans.

“I said I’m not lying! I swear I saw it! It said *It’s a trap. Don’t kill my daughter!*” said Adlet. But his insistence wasn’t even affecting Mora, let alone Hans or Goldof. The party had taken it as fact that the message was a lie.

“...To be honest, I’ve got no sure proof about the seventh, neither. But neow I’ve gathered up enough evidence that I can say I’m certain.” Hans was sauntering about the area, but Adlet couldn’t lower his sword. There were no chinks in Hans’s armor. If the boy let his guard down, the assassin would slice him up.

“But before I tell ya my evidence that Adlet is the seventh, I’ve gotta talk

about my assumptions here. First of all, I think everythin' Fremy has told us is true. She actually does hate the fiends, and she really did get betrayed by her family. That was no lie."

Adlet agreed with that.

"But that means there's somethin' funny. Why would Tgurneu hurt her and make her hate fiends at all? What'd it have to do that for? All Tgurneu would've had to do is set up the fake Crest of the Six Flowers, order Fremy to infiltrate the Braves, and then have 'er keep on pretendin' to be their ally until the power of the Barrenbloom kills us all. Fremy swore allegiance to Tgurneu. So why didn't Tgurneu pick that option?"

Hans continued. "There's a bunch of possible answers to that question. Was Tgurneu afraid of the power of the Saint of Words, since she could stop anyone from lyin'? Ain't out of the question. But in that case, all Tgurneu'd have to do is to send a fiend into the human realms to keep her outta the picture.

"So did Tgurneu figger Fremy *actin'* like she hates fiends would be harder to catch than makin' her actually hate 'em? That ain't it, either, *meow*. She ain't stupid. She wouldn't be that easy to read."

Hans spread his arms. "Makin' Fremy hate fiends was a risky move for Tgurneu. What if she just gave up on life and offed herself? What if she didn't even consider revenge and chose to live a low-key life in the human realms? After puttin' all that work into its plan, it'd be back to square one. In other words, Tgurneu had to make Fremy hate 'em all, no matter how risky that was. I can only think of one reason for that, and that's to make Fremy into a real Brave of the Six Flowers. Tgurneu would have to make her honestly hate fiends and sincerely want to beat the Evil God, or she wouldn't get the Crest of the Six Flowers. That's why I've concluded Fremy ain't the seventh."

"So what?" said Adlet.

"I ain't done yet here. Hold yer horses. So if Fremy ain't the seventh, that brings up another question: What did Tgurneu make a seventh for? Fremy is the Black Barrenbloom, and she can kill us all just by bein' close by. So there's no need for a seventh in the first place. In fact, a seventh bein' around would actually hurt Tgurneu. If we suspected Fremy and killed her, then all those

carefully laid plans'd be for nothin'."

He has a point , thought Adlet. He couldn't allow himself to agree with Hans, but what he was saying did seem to be entirely true.

"Yeah, there were a bunch o' times it all coulda fallen apart. Back in the Phantasmal Barrier, Fremy was the first person we were suspicious of. And since comin' to the Howlin' Vilelands, me and Chamo have been eyein' her this whole time. Why'd Tgurneu risk that? What was the point of a seventh?"

"Well..."

"It's true that havin' a seventh confused us. We suspected Mora, then Goldof, then Rolonia. We were suspicious of our allies, it prevented us from fightin' at full strength, and it's slowed us down. But *meow* , that weren't enough to risk losin' the Black Barrenbloom.

"It was true that Tgurneu needed a seventh to pull that trick on Mora. But sorry, Mora, I can't imagine Tgurneu would think killin' you was worth losin' Fremy.

"Did Tgurneu plan for the seventh to kill the Braves as part of a separate plan? Neow way. The seventh had so many chances to kill us. If they were gonna betray us, they'd have already done it at any number of points. But even though they've had all those chances, the seventh hasn't killed even one of us after all this time."

"Hans..." Adlet had finally come to understand what the assassin was preparing to say.

"Based on all that informeowtion, this is what I figger. Tgurneu gave the seventh just one order: to make sure Fremy met the Six Braves and protect her the whole time. And that's all, *meow* . " Hans looked at Adlet. "*Meow* , so based on that assumption, think back on everythin' Adlet's done."

A chill ran down Adlet's spine. He was terrified—by both the persuasiveness of Hans's words and the conclusion they led to.

"...He made up that story...about the glowing message...to protect...Fremy..." said Goldof.

Hans nodded. “What’s meowr, before that, he told us to hide what we knew about Fremy. Though, me and Rolonia agreed to that, so we share in the blame.”

It’s true that I lied. But not on Tgurneu’s orders. He’d lied because Fremy was important to him and he didn’t want to let her die, not because he wanted to use her to kill the Six Braves.

“Adlet made all those meowvelous declarations about not suspectin’ our allies without real proof. *I won’t let ya say yer sure any one of us is the seventh* , he said. Now, I think that was to protect Fremy.”

That’s bullshit. He’d been desperate to prevent the members of the group from turning on one another.

“Before we arrived...at the Phantasmal Barrier...Her Highness and I...attacked Fremy. Adlet protected her then...too,” said Goldof.

Because Adlet knew she was a Brave of the Six Flowers. She was an ally, so he had protected her. He’d thought that was the obvious choice.

“And when the Phantasmal Barrier was activated, Adlet kept sayin’ Fremy weren’t the culprit with no proof at all. She was the Brave-killer and the daughter of a fiend. How could he think it wasn’t her? Even when he was under suspicion and about to be killed, he didn’t suspect her, even once. So why? The answer’s simple. Adlet knew it wasn’t her, and he had to protect her. That’s the only reason, *meow* .” Hans continued. “And the biggest piece of evidence is this: Back in the Phantasmal Barrier, Fremy told me she never meant to meet up with us, but Adlet stopped her. He hounded her and chased her, then stole her packs and ran off with them. That was how Fremy finally decided to connect with us. I think that’s a clincher.”

“That’s bullshit!” Adlet yelled. “She was an ally, and there was only going to be six of us! You know just how dangerous it would be for her to go solo without even talking to us! Is it weird to ask her to join up with us?!”

“Not at all,” Hans replied. “Lookin’ at each thing on its own, none of it’s been weird—aside from that lie ameowt the glowin’ message. You’ve always made like you were fightin’ for the Braves to win. But everything you’ve done has been to help the Barrenbloom kill us. Until I came here, I’d considered the

possibility that the seventh didn't realize they were the seventh. But now I think there's neow way. Yer clearly actin' on Tgurneu's orders and tryin' to pull the wool over our eyes."

"I..."

"At the very least, one thing's clear: Without you, Fremy never would've met up with us, and the Black Barrenbloom wouldn't have activated. That's enough to say fer sure what you are."

"...That's really forced. You're adding one and one and making three or four."

"You were real clever 'bout it. Yer pretty amazin', Adlet. If we hadn't found out about the Barrenbloom, you'd have been able to keep up the deception the whole time. No, if I hadn't exposed yer lie 'bout the glowin' message, maybe you'd still have the wool over our eyes.

"Adlet, yer the seventh. Tgurneu ordered you to protect Fremy. Have I convinced ya how I came to that conclusion?"

Adlet was trembling—not in fear, but in rage.

He had been so devastated when he lost his home village; he utterly loathed Tgurneu. What hell had he survived to take Tgurneu down? Adlet felt as if Hans was crushing all his feelings underfoot—even labeling his desire to protect Fremy as fake. "Tgurneu destroyed my home. Do you think I would obey that monster?"

Dozzu said, "The humans Tgurneu most likely controlled have obeyed orders gladly, as if it was the greatest joy to them. Tgurneu's ability to control humans...is likely quite powerful."

Adlet couldn't recall any orders from Tgurneu. He would never obey that fiend.

"We don't really kneow if Tgurneu has that ability to control people or not. Tgurneu could be controllin' Adlet, or the story about his village bein' destroyed itself could be a lie."

"Tgurneu hasn't ordered me to do anything! It's a coincidence that I met Fremy! I protected her because she's important to me! The moment I saw her, I

wanted to protect her! There's no other reason!"

"*Meow* , that's just what the seventh would say," Hans said, scoffing at him.

Slung over Rolonia's shoulders, Fremy was thinking.

It was only just a moment ago that she had become certain Adlet was the seventh. When he had lied about the glowing message, Fremy had figured there was about a 90 percent chance. When he had stabbed her with the paralysis needle and arranged her escape from Chamo, she became sure of it.

But she had first begun to suspect him much earlier. Had it been when Rolonia had first appeared? Or when the seventh had shown up in the Phantasmal Barrier? Or perhaps she had suspected him ever since they'd first met.

Fremy had a far tougher constitution than a regular human, so she was slowly regaining control of her body again. She could probably speak now. She could also likely create gunpowder—though that was continuing to be hard to control—but she chose to pretend the paralysis had still not worn off. If Rolonia noticed, she would tie up Fremy with her whip to prevent her from killing herself, maybe even knock her out. So once Fremy was recovered enough to move without trouble, she would slip off Rolonia's shoulder and make a break for Chamo's slave-fiends, who would kill her. Then it would all be over.

Fremy had decided to give up on killing Adlet, the seventh, with her own hands. It was more important that she prioritize eliminating the Black Barrenbloom—herself. She would leave handling Adlet and defeating Tgurneu and the Evil God to her allies. Hans or Chamo would be sure to accomplish that.

"This isn't good," said Nashetania as she skewered the creature attacking Rolonia. "Chamo knows where we are. If all her slave-fiends gather here, the two of us will clearly have a difficult time managing them all."

"I-it's okay. I'm sure Addy will do something."

Fremy's feelings were complicated as she listened to Rolonia. She was being deceived, and Fremy wanted to help her, somehow. But she doubted Rolonia would believe anything she had to say.

Fremy recalled that Adlet had shown her favor ever since they first met. He'd

smiled like such an idiot, saying he would protect her. That, she could understand—because he hadn't known anything about her back then.

But then Adlet had found out that Fremy was the Brave-killer, and Fremy herself had told him she was the daughter of a fiend. But in spite of that, nothing had changed about his attitude toward her. That was when Fremy had become certain that Adlet was using her.

No human in their right mind would be friendly toward her. A human whose home village had been destroyed by fiends would not meekly accept one of them as an ally. Adlet had to despise her, deep down in his heart. He must have been hiding it as he feigned affection for her—in order to use her.

When the other Braves had become suspicious, Adlet had taken Fremy as his hostage and run, and he'd used her to survive. He'd done whatever he could to try to get Fremy on his side: spewing tender inanities at her and falsely insisting that he'd fallen head over heels in love. Even as he'd declared he was the strongest man in the world, he'd relied on his allies to save him, and Fremy held utter disdain toward him for that.

But in the end, she had saved Adlet. When Mora and Goldof had been chasing him, she had protected him. When Adlet had fallen wounded and nearly died, she had frantically treated his wounds. Fremy could write off these actions as a momentary lapse of judgment. It wasn't that she'd trusted him—much less loved him. She'd been fully aware he was using her. Because she'd known that in his heart, he actually hated her.

The morning after that, Rolonia had shown up, deepening the mysteries even further. Then the Braves of the Six Flowers had entered the Howling Vilelands and begun the real battle with Tgurneu. Adlet had continued to act as though he loved Fremy. His gaze was always filled with love toward her, though he wouldn't spare even a glance at Rolonia, who was quite fond of him.

Fremy had interpreted his actions to mean he thought she might betray them. He was probably worried that Fremy would hesitate to fight the fiends who had raised her; maybe she wanted to go back to her family. When Adlet had whispered about how he would make her happy, sworn he would protect her, and acted like he would never suspect her, he must have been trying to win her

over to his side. The self-proclaimed strongest man in the world, and as others called him: the cowardly warrior. He had declared he would do whatever it took to win. He must not have felt even a pang of guilt for murmuring about the love he didn't feel in the name of victory.

Or that was how Fremy had interpreted his actions. Though she'd found him aggravating, though he infuriated her, she'd been unable to truly loathe him. She'd continually worried about him since he was so weak and unreliable. If they'd never come to this temple, she would never have realized how he really felt.

Now, Fremy knew the truth about herself. She knew about the Black Barrenbloom, which could kill all the Braves just by existing. And at the same time, she also understood why Adlet had tried to protect her—to kill the Braves of the Six Flowers. He'd pretended to love her to make her let her guard down, and also because he needed to justify his protection. If he was a real Brave fighting to defeat the Evil God and Tgurneu, there would be no need for him to protect her at this point. He would have no reason to lie about any message.

She no longer felt anger at being used—because she'd known all along. No one would love a monster like her. All she felt toward Adlet was a pure desire to kill. She would have her revenge against anyone who would ally themselves with Tgurneu.

More slave-fiends were attacking Rolonia and Nashetania now. The pair took them down and ran, defeated more and then ran again, over and over. Little by little, the slave-fiends were catching up.

"This might be impossible," said Nashetania. The two together would be able to escape. But still, being surrounded by so many slave-fiends would make it difficult. "Adlet isn't coming, so shall we resign and offer Fremy to Chamo?"

"We—we couldn't. What would we have come here for, then?" Rolonia was upset.

"This was to stop a falling-out among allies. But even saying that, I have no obligation to expose myself to danger. I value my own life."

Fremy couldn't understand what Nashetania wanted. At first, she had suspected she was complicit with Adlet in his plan to kill the Six Braves, but that

didn't seem likely anymore. Had she actually not realized who the seventh was? Was she that slow on the uptake?

But even if Nashetania was plotting something, that wouldn't change Fremy's course of action. She was slowly recovering from the paralysis. Once she could move again, she'd simply wait for her chance to slip down from Rolonia's shoulder. Then she would let a slave-fiend bite her head off.

No matter how Nashetania's blades or Rolonia's whips sliced up the slave-fiends or drove them back, Chamo's "pets" would immediately recover to chase them down again. Slowly, Fremy began to see the pair was getting exhausted.

Hans was blocking the way into the labyrinth, and Goldof had circled around behind Adlet. Either might attack at any time.

Enraged, Adlet took a deep breath to regain his composure. Right then, it didn't matter that they were suspicious of him. This wasn't the first time his allies had been hostile toward him. He didn't have to lose control over this.

The important thing now was to protect Fremy. The paralysis poison would wear off soon. He had to stop Chamo and change Fremy's mind by then. But Hans was right in front of him, holding him down.

"Hans, you really must not do this. Lower your sword," said Mora. She stood in front of Adlet defensively. "I understand he's suspicious. You've convinced me as well. But a number of things fail to coincide with the idea that he's acting under Tgurneu's orders."

"Probably, but I don't give a *meow*. I've decided I'm gonna kill 'im here and now."

"Why?!"

"A hunch," said Hans, leaving Mora speechless. "I've been an assassin for just about ten years. I've escaped death more times than I got fingers. When it came to sink or swim, this intuition saved my life. If I don't believe in my hunches, then there ain't nothin' I can believe, and it's tellin' me to make sure Fremy and Adlet die. If I don't, I'll be the one to die."

There was a metallic noise behind Adlet. Goldof, standing in front of the door, must have raised his spear.

“Goldof, you too? You can’t tell me you believe in this *hunch* of Hans’s?!”

“I feel...hesitant. But I think...this is one of those times...when we have to decide.” Adlet could sense behind him that Goldof was ready to kill. “But...I feel it...too. Fremy...and Adlet...are sure to...bring harm to Her Highness...eventually. I can’t shake...that feeling.”

This is a disaster. The thought rose in Adlet’s mind. There had to be a way out of this, and then a way to stop Chamo. And most importantly, a way to make Fremy stop trying to kill herself. But Adlet couldn’t even guess at how he might accomplish that.

But no matter how disastrous the situation, Adlet would never allow himself to lose heart. He stood back-to-back with Mora. Hans and Goldof were closing in on them from either side. “Mora, what’s going on with that game of tag inside the labyrinth?” asked Adlet.

Using her clairvoyance, Mora told him where Rolonia and the others were, adding that Nashetania was supporting Rolonia.

Adlet also asked, “Does it look like you can stop Chamo? Do you think you can convince Fremy, too?”

“Fremy is still on your mind? You’re the one under suspicion,” Mora said, exasperated.

But Adlet didn’t give a damn about himself. Right then, all he could think about was keeping her safe.

“There is...the matter of the...seventh crest. It wouldn’t be...a good idea...to kill Adlet,” Goldof said to Hans.

“I kneow. We’ll just poke out his eyes or cut off his hands to make ’im helpless. Oh, and Dozzu—don’t ya get yerself involved. Just sit right down there.” It looked like Dozzu had something to say, but the fiend obediently sat down.

“Mora, you’ve got to convince them somehow. We’re going to make Fremy give up on killing herself,” Adlet said to Mora behind him.

“She won’t listen to me. It’s no use, no matter what any of us tell her.”

How can you give up before you've even gotten started? thought Adlet. He had no choice but to face Fremy and talk to her, after all. If he could convince her to stay alive, then with Rolonia, the three of them could face Chamo. If Adlet couldn't convince her, then he'd have no choice but to hit her with another paralysis needle and carry her out of the temple.

"Get the hell outta my way, Hans!" Adlet yelled, rushing at the assassin.

At the same moment, Hans leaped, running up the wall to kick off the ceiling and attack from Adlet's blind spot. The boy couldn't even follow him. Hans had always been so much better at swordplay than he was. And to make it worse, Hans's superhuman style of martial arts and swordsmanship shone most in close quarters.

"Adlet!" Hans cried.

There was no way Adlet could dodge that attack. He'd probably have a hard time blocking, too. So he wasn't going to dodge. Adlet kept running straight ahead without making a single move to defend or attack.

"Meow?" Adlet's choice of action took Hans by surprise. He must not have anticipated that Adlet wouldn't respond at all. Hans's first swipe cut through air, and he landed on the ground with both hands to launch straight into another jump, slashing out at Adlet's back.

Still, the boy didn't dodge. He took his chances.

"I won't permit that, Hans!"

Adlet had figured Mora would stop Hans's second attack, and he was right. She body-slammed the assassin into a wall.

Adlet ran straight down the hallway of the labyrinth, but Goldof was not going to silently stand by and watch.

"What are you doing, Hans?"

Adlet felt something deadly bearing down from behind and instantly leaped. A dagger flew just inches under his feet.

Goldof had thrown it. "Hans! After him!"

"Meow!"

Adlet could hear the two behind him. They'd catch him if he stopped, so he raced into the labyrinth at full speed.

Adlet had dodged Goldof's dagger, and Mora had blocked Hans. Seeing that, Goldof had attacked Mora.

He wasn't fast enough to catch Adlet. Hans was the only one who could stop him.

After slamming Hans into the wall, Mora was trying to wrestle him down.

Goldof thrust the butt of his spear into Mora's stomach from the side. He did hold back, but the strike was enough to get Hans free.

"Ngh, Adlet!" As Mora took the hit, she pulled something from under her armor to throw to him. He caught it without even looking back.

"I'm not lettin' ya go, *meow* !" Hans chased after Adlet.

Then Goldof saw Mora pull out one other object. Blocking Goldof's attacks with her armor, Mora threw it against the wall with full force.

"*Hrmeow!*" Hans's pursuit came to a sudden halt, as if he'd slammed into something. Goldof saw something membrane-like right at the turn in the hallway where Adlet had disappeared.

"Mora..." He had witnessed something similar before, when they'd been barricaded in the Bud of Eternity. It was an instant barrier. Back then, Mora had trapped Tgurneu inside one. But this seemed to be just the opposite: a barrier that kept enemies out. The barrier blocked the path Adlet had gone down. Hans hit it with the hilt of his sword, but to no avail.

With her mountain echo, Mora called out. **"Adlet, if you throw that on the ground, it will raise a barrier. Generally, it would require continuous energy poured into it in order to be maintained, but in the mountains, it can absorb power from the earth itself. Here, you should be able to use it. If you encounter Hans again, use that and run."**

"...So even after all that, ya still don't get it, huh, Mora?" Hans was exasperated.

"Your and Goldof's hunches are wrong. I don't believe Adlet is our enemy."

Mora slipped through the barrier and followed after Adlet. It seemed she was able to nullify the barrier for herself. **“If you two will trust your hunches, then I will trust my own. I won’t let you lay a hand on Adlet ,”** Mora said over her shoulder, and then she disappeared from Hans’s and Goldof’s view.

Hans watched with a bitter smile. Despite how much more dire the situation had become, Goldof could see no urgency at all in his attitude. “Well, whatever. It’d be borin’ without this meowch at least.” Hans was enjoying this, for reasons Goldof couldn’t understand.

It would doubtless be difficult, but nevertheless, they had to chase down Adlet. Goldof was about to run off down the open hallway, away from Mora, when Hans said, “Wait. You stay here and keep an eye on Dozzu.”

Goldof turned to look back. Dozzu was sitting in front of the room with the Saint of the Single Flower.

“Those two didn’t come here just to find out about the Black Barrenbloom,” Hans explained. “They’ve got to be plottin’ somethin’. Keep a watch on Dozzu, and don’t let it meowve a step outta here.”

Goldof was uneasy about leaving Adlet at large, but he couldn’t just leave Dozzu there, either. And to be honest, neither did he know what Her Highness was up to, following after Rolonia.

“You leave Adlet to me.”

“You just...failed to catch him...though.”

“Don’t give me that,” Hans said awkwardly, then ran into the labyrinth.

But would he be able to capture Adlet in this massive maze?

“...Good grief. And after we managed to uncover Tgurneu’s plot, too. This is troubling.”

As if this was someone else’s problem, Dozzu settled itself down and watched the Braves fight one another.

As Adlet ran, he wondered what he should say to Fremy in order to stop her from killing herself. But he realized he had no idea what was actually on her mind. *I’m pathetic* , he thought. He couldn’t comprehend a single thing about

what went on in the heart of the woman most important to him. In this sad state, he was no “strongest man in the world.”

There wasn't even a single thought in his mind about how he himself was suspected. If the others had doubts about him, he just had to convince them. But the dead would never come back.

“...Adlet ,” came Mora's mountain echo. **“Fremy and the others are in that direction. But if you continue on that way, Chamo's slave-fiends will capture you. Go around.”**

“Yeah, I got it.” Adlet couldn't afford to forget about Chamo, either. Even if he convinced Fremy, if Chamo caught her, she could kill her. Hans and Goldof also weren't on his side, and it was uncertain how long Rolonia and Mora would continue to protect Fremy. He had to be prepared to keep on fighting alone.

“...?” That was when Adlet got an odd feeling. His current situation, Hans's inferences, and that he himself was not the seventh all solidified into one.

As Hans had said, the chances that the seventh had been sent to protect Fremy were high. If so, what was the seventh doing?

Hans, Chamo, and Goldof had resolved to kill Fremy, and Fremy had resolved to die. Rolonia and Mora were protecting Fremy, but neither was being proactive enough about it. Neither had shown any signs of acting without Adlet's instruction. Adlet was the only one who had actively tried to protect Fremy.

If the seventh did mean to protect Fremy, they would have interfered with the deciphering of the hieroglyphs. Adlet would have also expected them to present evidence that Fremy was not the Black Barrenbloom. But nobody had done anything.

So who was the seventh? Why weren't they intervening? Were they fine with Fremy being killed?

That was when Adlet sensed a presence. His train of thought ground to a halt, and his feet stopped, too. He looked around, then started running again. “Mora, is this the path I should be headed down?”

He heard the mountain echo's reply. **“Wait just a moment. I'm making sure**

right now... Yes, that's correct."

Adlet kept on thinking.

After running for a while, he noticed something unusual. Though he'd made his way through the labyrinth according to Mora's instructions, he couldn't hear the slave-fiends fighting with Rolonia and Nashetania. "Hey, Mora. Which way should I go now?" he asked uneasily.

"Continue from there to take the long way around the outer circumference of the labyrinth and you'll reach Rolonia. Turn right at the next junction."

Checking to make sure that Hans and Goldof weren't following, Adlet ran on. Turning one more corner, he found a dead end. "...Mora, what's going on here? Answer me."

He couldn't hear her mountain echo.

"Mora, answer me! Which way is it?! You made a mistake!" he yelled.

The answer came to him immediately—not as a mountain echo, but as a voice from behind him. "'Tis no mistake." Mora appeared, slowly rounding the corner. She stopped, blocking his way and preventing him from going anywhere. "I meant to lead you into a dead end all along. I can't let you go to Rolonia and the others."

Adlet's legs suddenly felt weak beneath him. Fremy's paralysis would wear off soon. Once that happened, Rolonia wouldn't be able to protect her alone, and there was no way he could rely on Nashetania. And in this labyrinth, without Mora's guidance, he wouldn't even be able to catch up to them.

"Fremy will die now," said Mora.

But even so, he couldn't give up.

He used a smoke screen to cloud Mora's vision and tried to run past her, but thanks to her abilities, it had no effect. She swept his legs out from under him and grabbed him, slamming him into the wall of the dead end.

"Ngh!"

The smoke cleared. Adlet was leaning against the wall as Mora watched him sadly. "I don't believe you're the seventh, as Hans does, and I don't say this with

intent to deceive you. I do feel this sincerely.”

“...Move, Mora.”

“...Let me tell you what I think.” Quietly, Mora began to speak. “Dozzu spoke before of Tgurneu’s ability to control humans. I don’t know if it truly possesses such an ability. This may just be a misunderstanding on Dozzu’s part, or it could be lying to us.”

As Adlet listened to her, he was looking for his chance to dash past her.

“But I simply can’t believe that any one of us is acting on Tgurneu’s orders. It seems clear to me we are all fighting in earnest. We may have different ideas and motives, but I believe everyone is putting in our full effort to save the world.”

“...?”

“You’re all good youngsters. You, Hans, Fremy—all of you.”

Adlet slowly stood up.

“Let me tell you what I believe,” Mora went on. “Fremy is the seventh, and she came here without being aware that she is the seventh, and also without being aware of her identity as the Black Barrenbloom. Tgurneu deceived her, and manipulated her into attempting revenge.”

“What for?”

“Tgurneu must have surmised Fremy stood little chance of being chosen as a Brave of the Six Flowers. Six other more qualified people could appear. A fiend may not even be bestowed with the crest in the first place. That would ruin the plan. The best way to ensure that Fremy would meet up with the Six Braves was to give her the seventh crest.”

“...Get out of my way, Mora.”

“After that, Tgurneu sprung that trap on me. If you all believed I was the seventh as I died, you would no longer suspect Fremy. We would also stop trying to kill one another. That was surely what Tgurneu was after.”

Adlet didn’t care who the seventh was. He didn’t care what Tgurneu’s plan was, either. The only thing on his mind was a desire to save Fremy. It was his

dream to make her happy and release her from her hatred and isolation. If this dream was left unfulfilled, then their victory would be meaningless, he felt.

“We’ve won. You protected me then, Goldof protected Nashetania and built this alliance, Dozzu held that information about the Temple of Fate, and Rolonia found Rainer. We’ve destroyed Tgurneu’s plans completely.”

“But still, I—”

“Give up on Fremy.”

Give up. Her words echoed inside Adlet’s skull.

“I want to ensure her happiness, too, but she wishes for death. Allowing that death may also be a form of kindness.”

Adlet wanted no part of such “kindness.”

“Since it’s dangerous to kill the one who holds the seventh crest, we’ll transfer Fremy’s crest to Rolonia, who’s with her now. Or Chamo. I’m not certain one person may bear two crests, but it’s most likely possible. Though we also don’t know whether or not the seventh crest is transferable, so if that can’t be done, we must reconsider.”

“What’s Rolonia...? What’s Fremy doing?” Adlet asked.

“This will be painful for you to hear, but...it should be soon.”

Adlet had stood up once, but he hit the wall again and slumped down. There were just moments left. Without Mora’s cooperation, he would not be able to communicate with Fremy. He had no means of stopping Chamo or backing up Rolonia.

Was there no way at all? Was there nothing more he could do from where he was? Adlet desperately racked his brain. *Don’t despair*, he told himself. He recalled Atreau’s maxim: Laugh at despair.

“Is our only option to let Fremy die?” Adlet muttered. But at the same time, it struck him that something was off. Even as he sank further into his despair, he contemplated what this odd feeling might actually be. He considered the actions of Fremy, the Black Barrenbloom; the as of yet unknown identity of the seventh; the suspicions toward himself; and Hans’s reasoning that Adlet was

the seventh.

He agreed that part of Hans's deductions were on the mark. And he believed Mora's reasoning was completely off. Tgurneu wasn't that easy. He thought about the hieroglyphs that described the Black Barrenbloom, the as of yet concealed power of the Barrenbloom, and about how Dozzu had said Tgurneu was controlling someone.

And then, there was the fact that he himself was not the seventh.

He ruminated on his own doubts about why the seventh wasn't protecting Fremy. And then finally, the actions of the fiends. Everything came together at one singularity, and he arrived at his conclusion.

I'm an idiot. How had he never come up with this answer before? And then he thought, one more time, *I have to protect Fremy, no matter what it takes. No matter what happens. Even if it means giving my own life.*

"Do you concede, Adlet?" Mora said quietly.

Adlet covered his face with his hands, and his shoulders heaved with sobs.

"...I don't have the slightest idea what I could say to you now, Adlet..." Mora approached him. "I'm sorry for making you suffer like this. I was able to protect my daughter, but you..." Gently, Mora put her hand on Adlet's shoulder.

Until that moment, she hadn't realized—that he was faking it.

This was the only way. He didn't have the time to think about what he would do afterward. Adlet was certain that if he let Fremy die now, then the Braves of the Six Flowers were over.

"...?"

Adlet grabbed Mora's hand on his shoulder.

Adlet and Mora had failed to realize that specialist number thirty was right beside them, camouflaged against the flagstones about a few dozen yards behind Mora, listening to their conversation.

Meanwhile, Fremy was starting to feel like she could really move. She wasn't entirely back to normal, but it was enough to escape Rolonia. There were quite a few more slave-fiends surrounding Nashetania and Rolonia now. The two had

their hands full just defending themselves.

Slung over Rolonia's shoulder, Fremy broke her act of immobility by kicking Rolonia in the back of the head with her knee.

"Ah!" Rolonia pitched forward. Fremy wriggled out of her grasp and began limping toward the slave-fiends nearby, since her legs hadn't completely recovered.

"You can't! Fremy!" cried Rolonia.

Fremy submitted her head to the fangs of a water snake slave-fiend. But that moment, all the slave-fiends froze, immediately returned to their mud form, and left like an ebbing wave.

"...Huh?" Not understanding why, Fremy was confused. Rolonia panicked and jumped on her to pin her down.

"Let go. You're in the way."

"No, Fremy. You can't die!"

"...This is odd. Did something happen to Chamo?" wondered Nashetania.

While shaking off Rolonia, Fremy was thinking the same thing. There was no reason for Chamo to stop trying to kill her. It couldn't be— Had Adlet defeated her?

But the moment that thought came to Fremy's mind, they heard Chamo's voice. "This is bad! Fremy! Stop trying to die right now!" Fremy was confused. Even as they spoke, the Black Barrenbloom was sucking away their power.

"Rolonia! Princess! Stop Fremy! We can't let her die right now!" Chamo's voice was approaching. Rolonia looked relieved and released Fremy. She must have figured Adlet had done something.

Chamo came over to the three of them, straddling a slug slave-fiend's back. Her taut expression was burning with anger. She slid down from the slug's back, marched up to Rolonia, and punched her in the head with her fist as hard as she could, enough to injure her own wrist. "You're a huge idiot, Rolonia. You've really done it now."

"...Wh-what happened?"

“Auntie’s mountain echo didn’t reach you?” Chamo was clenching her teeth in anger. Rolonia seemed to finally realize that something grave had happened.

“Auntie got taken hostage—by Adlet.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Adlet captured Auntie. She can’t do anything. If we kill Fremy, he’s gonna cut off her head right that second! That’s what he’s saying!”

At first, Rolonia gave a little laugh, as if to say *You’re kidding me*.

When she understood it was no lie, she sank down hard onto the floor.

“...I see,” Fremy muttered quietly. “So it’s come to this, Adlet.” She felt no anger, nothing. She’d known for a while now that Adlet was the seventh, and he would use any means to win.

“I’m going, Rolonia. I have to defeat Adlet and save Mora,” Fremy icily told the stunned girl.

Chapter 4
Siege



Chapter 4

Siege

At the edge of the labyrinth, a hallway split into many branches, and the sounds of battle were emanating from the dead end of one of the passages.

“Ngh!”

A fiend was attacking Adlet—a lizard-fiend with a white body. It scuttled up the wall and crawled onto the ceiling, striking out at the boy with its long tail. Normally, this creature would be no match for him. But this time, Adlet failed to block its attacks as it skittered around him, slicing him with the spike at the end of its tail.

One of his arms was occupied. Under his left arm, he held the unconscious Mora, leaving only his right hand free for the fight.

The white lizard-fiend was targeting both Mora and Adlet. Adlet was forced to guard himself as well as Mora, who weighed heavily under his arm. He couldn't block all the enemy's attacks.

“Tch!”

The white lizard-fiend raised its head then, as if it had noticed something. It distanced itself a little from Adlet and then transformed into a flat shape indistinguishable from the stone floor. Adlet threw a needle, but it hit the flagstones with an ineffective clink and rolled along the floor. The white lizard-fiend had already vanished.

A little over ten seconds after the fiend had appeared, Adlet heard a different set of footsteps. “Damn it. He's already here?”

“...*Meow.*” Hans was strolling slowly along the labyrinth hallway. When he saw Adlet and Mora, his face twitched into a smile.

At the opposite end of the labyrinth from Adlet, the youngest Saint spoke.

“Chamo's pets are saying that just a little while ago, they saw Auntie and Adlet. They're probably still around there. Let's hurry.”

Fremy moved her still somewhat paralyzed body, picking up the gun Rolonia had dropped. Then she started walking in the direction Chamo had indicated. Rolonia was still slumped on the floor, just shaking her head. She must not have been able to believe what the other girl was saying.

“You moo-head!” Chamo kicked Rolonia in the face with the bottom of her shoe.

Rolonia cried out and covered her face.

“Just look at what you’ve done! If you hadn’t been so stupid, Chamo would’ve been able to kill Fremy, and Auntie wouldn’t have gotten captured! It’s all your fault!”

“B-but...Addy said I have to protect her...*ngh!*”

“Shut up!” Chamo kicked her in the face again.

Fremy sighed. “Argue about whose fault it is later.”

At that time, all their attention, including Fremy’s, was off Nashetania. They hadn’t noticed her slowly drawing away from the rest of them.

“Nashetania?”

But by the time they noticed, it was too late. Nashetania had vanished, using the stealth ability she’d used inside the Phantasmal Barrier.

“This is bad. Run!” Fremy bit her own finger. Pain would enable her to see through her ability. But even when Fremy concentrated, she couldn’t see Nashetania. In this complex labyrinth, it wouldn’t take long to escape.

“Follow her!” Chamo gave instructions to her slave-fiends. Fremy considered setting off the bombs she had attached to Nashetania’s legs, but she changed her mind, figuring that now was a bad time. They couldn’t afford to make an enemy of Dozzu in a situation like this, and they had no idea what Goldof might do in that case, either.

“Leave the princess to Chamo’s pets. Right now, Auntie is more important.” Chamo dashed off, and Fremy followed after her, pulling Rolonia by the hand.

“Why, Addy? If you do that...if you do that...” Rolonia kept on muttering, holding her head.

“Yer repertoire is meowr limited than I thought,” Hans said as he eyed the unconscious Mora.

Adlet had pricked her with paralysis and sleep needles, and she was dozing like a doll. Adlet held her under his left arm, which was around her neck with a knife to her throat. Her arms were bare of her gauntlets, and the various tools she’d been carrying in her clothing were scattered on the floor. Adlet had been the one to disarm her. Even with her healing power as the Saint of Mountains and her superhuman physical strength, if Mora had her throat cut while unconscious, she was dead. It should have been enough of a threat.

But Hans didn’t seem uneasy in the least about that. “We saw ya use that one in the Phantasmal Barrier. And what’s more, now you’ve got nowhere to run this time.” He pointed with his sword behind Adlet. Adlet was at a dead end of this corner of the labyrinth. The only way out was the narrow hallway about thirteen feet wide, and Hans was blocking it. Adlet was a trapped rat.

“Don’t move, Hans. I’ll kill Mora.”

Hans showed no reaction to Adlet’s threat. He swayed, looking for a chance to strike. And then, in a flash, he leaped like a coiled spring.

Adlet kicked a crack in the flagstones with his toe. The tiny stake fitted into his boot stabbed into the gap there, and instantly, a film of light covered an area about sixteen feet around Adlet.

“*Meow!*” Hans crashed into the film of light headfirst and fell straight down to the ground. That had been a close one. If Adlet had activated the barrier too late, he would have lost his left arm. Holding his face, Hans got up.

“...You don’t even care?” Adlet muttered. Hans hadn’t even been considering Mora’s life. He’d just gone straight for him.

That was when Adlet heard Chamo’s angry yell coming from behind Hans. *This is bad.*

Chamo, Rolonia, and Fremy all turned the corner to find Adlet—and Mora, too, unconscious in Adlet’s grasp—and the barrier separating him from Hans.

Rolonia, face pale, covered her mouth with a cry. Chamo’s lips trembled in anger. Fremy was watching Adlet quietly. Her expression was stony, not much

different than usual. But in her face was anger and murderous intent. It was the same way she had looked at Tgurneu.

“Fremy...” Adlet felt pain shoot through his chest. He’d known that taking a hostage would result in this. But it still hurt to see her so antagonistic toward him.

That was when Adlet realized that Hans’s target had changed. Now he meant to kill Fremy.

“Stop it, Hans!” he yelled.

Hans ignored him and sliced at her as if to behead her.

But she repelled it with the grip of her gun. “Wait for now.”

“Don’t kill Fremy! If you do, Mora is toast!” Adlet yelled.

Hans didn’t listen to either of their attempts to stop him and went in for a second strike. Fremy leaped backward to avoid the attack. Though Adlet had taken a hostage to prevent Fremy’s death, that wasn’t going to accomplish anything at this rate. He knew he had to stop Hans, but there was almost nothing he could do from within the barrier.

“*Meow* , Fremy, why’re you still alive?” Hans approached her, spinning his swords.

“I still intend to die. But there’s a hostage right now.”

“But think about it, Fremy. His plan is to kill all of us. Yer gonna let everyone die ‘cause ya can’t bring yerself to let one go? Besides, even if ya don’t die, that’s no guarantee he’s gonna let Mora live.”

“No, listen to me,” said Adlet. But Hans completely ignored him, and Fremy shot him a murderous look.

“There’s no point in cedin’ to Adlet’s demands. You should die right here an’ neow. That’s the best option.”

Adlet pressed the knife to Mora’s throat just hard enough to cut her, but not kill her, to show the others he really was willing to do what it took.

“...Wait,” said Fremy. “If I die now, then we’ll have no way to save Mora. I

couldn't stand it if one of us was to die because of me."

"But—"

"I don't want to let her die. No, I don't want to let *any* of our allies die. I can't let you kill me until we save Mora." Fremy raised her gun. "If you're insisting that you have to, then I'll resist with full force."

"Chamo agrees with that. Catboy, we need Auntie. We might be able to save her, so let's wait just a bit longer to kill Fremy."

Hearing both objections, Hans sighed. "You folks are naive. This is gettin' to be a real pain in the ass, but I guess we have neow choice." Hans turned to Adlet and smirked. "Neow ain't that nice, Adlet? Looks like yer darlin' Fremy will live a li'l longer."

Don't you mock me, you asshole.

"But what do we do about that barrier? How did Adlet put that there?" asked Chamo.

"Mora gave it to him," Hans explained. "Neowmally, only she can use it, but in the mountains, he can, too. And there you have it, I guess."

"Auntie really is an idiot. Why'd she hand him something like that?" One of Chamo's slave-fiends body-slammed the barrier. The film of light merely trembled, refusing the slave-fiend entry.

"D'you know a way to break the barrier, Chamo?"

"...I think Auntie'd be able to let it down herself. And you could take it down if you pulled out the stake. But it doesn't look like we can." Chamo looked at the unconscious Mora. "With something like this, I think force is best. If we hit it as hard as we can, it'll break eventually." The slave-fiends slipped past Chamo to approach the light film.

Hans said, "Wait, *meow*. Where'd the princess go? She should've been with ya."

"...She ran away."

"Tell me what happened."

The slave-fiends stopped attacking. Chamo told Hans that when Nashetania had found out about Adlet taking a hostage, she'd run off.

Nashetania is plotting something, after all , Adlet thought. Saying she was going to protect Rolonia had likely been nothing more than an excuse to escape the eye of the Braves. He couldn't even guess what she was plotting.

"*Meow*. She's gettin' up to tricks while some of us are tryin' to have fun," Hans grumbled. "Chamo, send all the slave-fiends you got to go after the princess. Ya don't need to be here. Put all yer energy into capturin' her."

"O-okay. But what about Auntie?"

"Don't ya worry. Leave it to me. Besides, Fremy is here, too." Rolonia, who was trembling as she watched the scene from the very back, apparently was not counted among the fighting forces.

"Is it okay to leave Fremy here?" asked Chamo.

Fremy answered her. "Once we save Mora, I'll end my life immediately. I've never been afraid to die."

Chamo considered that for a bit. "I believe you, Fremy. And, catboy—don't let anything happen to Auntie, okay?"

"I won't let her," said Fremy. "I'll never let any of our allies die because of me."

Chamo nodded and got onto her slug slave-fiend. The other slave-fiends withdrew.

"We can't cut off Dozzu yet," said Hans, "so don't kill Nashetania by mistake. Also, have a few of yer slave-fiends keep watch around the temple. If the enemy comes, tell us right away, *meow*."

"Don't worry about a watch. Chamo's already doing that."

"And catch Goldof up to speed. Tell him to stay put and keep watch on Dozzu there."

"Got it. Then...Chamo'll leave Auntie to you." Chamo, astride the slave-fiend, receded from view.

I'm saved , thought Adlet. He had no idea how long this impromptu barrier would have held if it were forced the bear the full brunt of Chamo's might.

Once she was gone, Hans and Fremy turned their attention to Adlet.

"First, we have to destroy that barrier. Without Chamo, it looks like that'll take time." Fremy manifested a bomb in her hand.

"Meow , yer a lucky man, Adlet. This'll make it a bit of a fight. Or did ya arrange for this to happen, too?" Hans said as he approached the barrier. Then he slammed his twin blades against it. The film of light warped violently.

"Move, Hans." Fremy threw her bomb.

As Hans drew back, the membrane shuddered under the explosive blast.

"The barrier isn't that strong. We can definitely break it if we spend some time on it." Fremy threw another bomb and shot at the barrier right as the blast shook it.

Adlet's intuition was ringing alarm bells, so he ducked. Her bullet passed just an inch above his head. It wasn't going as fast, but if it had hit him, he would have been in trouble.

"It seems the barrier can't take multiple simultaneous hits," said Fremy. Her assault continued.

Right as she tossed another bomb toward Adlet, he launched a throwing knife back at her. It passed through the film of light to hit her explosive midair. It looked like it didn't block attacks from within. The bomb fell to the ground. Since Adlet had prevented the blast, the next bullet failed to penetrate the barrier.

"Meow , at this rate, we'll break through the barrier and save Mora, and then you'll be done. But you ain't one to sit there twiddlin' yer thumbs. So tell me. What's yer meowster plan? How are ya goin' to protect Fremy and kill us all?"

"I'm not going to. I'm not the seventh," Adlet said as he readied another throwing knife in his right hand.

"Shut up," said Fremy. "Keep your mouth shut until we kill you."

Adlet shot down her next bomb, too.

That was when Rolonia, who'd been trembling behind them the whole time, ran up to the barrier. "Please stop, Fremy! And Addy, too!"

"You're in the way, Rolonia." Fremy put away her bombs and shot at the barrier with her gun instead.

"...Addy, please, let go of Mora! They think you're the seventh; at this rate, they really are going to kill you!"

"Unfortunately, I can't. If I let go of Mora, Fremy will die."

"Th-then, Fremy. Please stop trying to die! Addy said if we defeat Tgurneu, the Black Barrenbloom will stop! S-so...!"

"I'll say it one more time: Move," said Fremy.

Rolonia held her head in her hands and shook it back and forth.

Watching, Adlet thought, *Relax, I have no intention of killing Mora, and I won't let Fremy die, too. I'm not gonna die, either. If we can convince Fremy now, we can break out of this situation.* He already had obtained all the tools he needed to accomplish that.

Impatience was starting to wear on Goldof as he watched Dozzu. He doubted Nashetania would act so rashly simply to stop a quarrel among the Braves. Did she plan to escape the temple or assassinate one of the Braves? Or was she plotting something else he couldn't anticipate? If Nashetania was up to something, the Braves would end up killing her. He prayed things wouldn't come to that.

When would Fremy die? They hadn't let Adlet escape, had they? Goldof had a plethora of worries. The situation hadn't changed, and there had been no word from Mora.

Indifferent to Goldof and his anxiety, Dozzu was sitting in silence, as if it were taking a nap right then and there.

"Goldof! Bad news! ...Wait, why is there a barrier here?"

Just then, Chamo arrived. Thanks to Mora's barrier, she stopped before she could reach them.

"Don't...worry about...the barrier. More importantly...what happened?"

The two conversed from opposite sides of the barrier. Hearing the situation from Chamo actually made him dizzy. Mora had been taken hostage, and Nashetania had disappeared. What's more, Goldof had to keep on watching Dozzu.

"This is troubling, but in a way, we can also take this as good news. Not only have we discovered the identity of the Black Barrenbloom, now we've essentially uncovered the seventh, too." Dozzu was calm, as usual.

"What're you planning to make the princess do, Dozzu?" demanded Chamo.

"I don't know anything. She must have her own idea about how to save Mora."

"...Do you wanna get tortured?" Chamo smiled.

Still seated, Dozzu gave a tiny shrug. "I doubt Hans would have told you to do that. I'm not plotting anything, and neither am I aware of what Nashetania intends to do."

It was pretty irritating to hear such a bald-faced lie coming from the fiend, but they couldn't do anything about Dozzu right then.

Chamo clicked her tongue and went off to go look for Nashetania. "If Dozzu does anything, give it a big whack!"

Goldof nodded and continued monitoring the fiend. Dozzu maintained its silence, expression composed.

Mora was down, and no one was watching over the temple as a whole anymore. But even then, specialist number fourteen stayed camouflaged. It had no idea when or where it might be found, and since it had no combat skills, it wouldn't stand a chance if it was discovered.

While Chamo had been chasing Fremy, number fourteen had kept hidden in a corner of the labyrinth. Chamo's slave-fiends had passed close by, and it had heard Fremy and Nashetania's voices, too. But even then, it had kept as stationary as a rock.

Number fourteen had left the decisions about what to do and who to attack up to number thirty. Number fourteen didn't have number thirty's sharp

hearing, nor its intelligence.

Number thirty was both fast and good at gathering information, so it was running around the inside and outside of the temple doing just that. It would decide what should be done, and number fourteen would carry it out. That was best.

Number fourteen wouldn't move without instructions, and even though number thirty could gather information, it didn't have the abilities to make use of it. The two fiends had a good relationship, compensating for each other's weaknesses.

Number thirty had gone out to scout just a little while earlier, and now it was coming back to report. It told fourteen that their mission was to kill Fremy.

Thirty replied that Fremy was inches from killing herself, and Adlet was preventing her death.

From what number fourteen had heard of the situation, Fremy's death and Adlet's defeat seemed inevitable. But number thirty was still afraid of him. There was a possibility he could reveal the identity of the seventh, anticipate the fiend's actions, and succeed in keeping Fremy safe, it said.

Number thirty explained that it had attacked Adlet, too, but alone, it wasn't enough of a fighter to handle him.

Adlet Mayer. He was the weakest warrior of the Braves, but fourteen had heard Tgurneu found him the most dangerous. It had no choice but to attack with its entire might and stay on full alert.

Fourteen had a special ability it had been waiting to use, one specialized for ambushes. It could do little else. The unique thing about this skill was that that the enemy wouldn't even realize they were being attacked. Fremy and Adlet were bound to die before they recognized the danger.

With the Braves at odds with one another, and with number fourteen's powers, it would be easy enough.

"Listen to me! I'm not the seventh!" Adlet yelled. "Fremy, stop attacking! This is a part of the enemy's trap! If you die now, all the Braves could die!"

But she ignored him, shooting bullet after bullet at him.

“Please wait, Fremy!” Rolonia extended her whip to try to steal the gun, but Fremy kicked her whip away and fired again.

That was when Hans said, “Fine, have yer say, Adlet.”

Adlet was surprised. Hans had no reason to listen to him.

“What’s the point of listening?” asked Fremy.

“So we can read him to see what kind of trick he plans to use on us neow. He’s bound to do somethin’. I can’t see what, yet. We need to be ready for it,” Hans said, sheathing his swords. “Besides, just tryin’ to tear down that barrier doesn’t make for much of a fight.”

“...So that’s what you’re really after, hmm? We don’t have time to waste on keeping you entertained,” Fremy snapped.

But Hans folded his arms in a spectating pose, and Rolonia was standing in Fremy’s way. Fremy scowled, uneasy.

Finally, Adlet had a chance to talk. He breathed a sigh of relief, while also glaring at Hans, thinking to himself that Hans’s laid-back attitude would be his downfall. “Listen up, Fremy. You think I’m the seventh, too, right?”

“Of course.”

“And there are a bunch of reasons you’d suspect me. But think about it. None proves I’m the seventh. You just think their job is to protect you, and since I’ve protected you all this time, I have to be a traitor, right? But you actually have no proof, do you?”

Fremy didn’t reply.

“I think the seventh’s job is to defend you, too, since there’s no way Tgurneu would have the daughter of a fiend encounter the Six Braves without any protection. But think back. Ultimately, was I the only one?”

“*Meow*,” Hans called.

“When the group was about to torture you, I wasn’t the one who stopped it. That was Hans. I clearly remember what he said. *If Fremy is the seventh, why is*

Adlet alive? Chamo stopped trying because Hans convinced her.”

“So what?” said Fremy.

“That’s not all. Even after he got Chamo to give up, the others were still suspicious of you. Remember how you were you absolved? Their suspicion was redirected toward me. And the one who falsely accused me of being a traitor back then wasn’t Nashetania, the actual seventh. It was Hans.

“And by the way, the one who resolved everything at the end and pinned down Nashetania wasn’t me, it was Hans. All to protect you. First, he made me the prime suspect, and then he found the real culprit—to prevent you from being suspected.”

Fremy glanced over at Hans. Adlet was certain his words were reaching her.

“You’ve been on my mind ever since we first met. I’ve always wanted to protect you. And that made me end up playing the role of the seventh. But there was someone else behind the scenes who really *was* protecting you.”

“Meow...”

“I can say this for certain: The seventh is Hans.”

“This is absurd,” Fremy spat.

“Now that I think of it,” Adlet continued, “Hans was acting funny back when Mora killed him. Why’d he go off to fight her all by himself? Hans, you planned to keep her quiet, didn’t you? You wanted to finish her off before she made any inconvenient confessions. You didn’t imagine you’d lose to her in a one-on-one fight.”

“I said, that’s absurd,” Fremy said bluntly. “Can’t you see what’s going on here? Hans is trying to kill me. You and Rolonia are the only ones who aren’t. It’s long-established now that Hans isn’t the one we’re looking for.”

“You’re telling me he’s innocent after he lied to the rest of us and pegged me instead?”

“...You’re talking about the glowing message,” said Fremy. Adlet nodded.

“Meow ,” Hans interjected, “so that’s what yer goin’ for, after all. If yer gonna insist you ain’t the seventh, you gotta lay the blame on me.”

“You’re going to keep insisting that Hans is the seventh? On that basis alone?” said Fremy.

Rolonia said, “Hans...were you really following Addy, then? You’re not plotting something again, are you?”

“Like how I tested ya in the forest? Not this time.”

Adlet continued. “You think I’m lying, don’t you? But I really did see it. And I don’t know why we couldn’t find the source. It might have been hidden so well even Mora couldn’t tell where the light came from. Maybe there’s a fiend hidden in the temple that erased any traces of it. Or maybe Hans destroyed the proof and kept that from her... I suspect that final possibility is our answer, though.

“Unfortunately, right now, there’s no way for me to prove that—and I’ve got nothing concrete that says I’m not the seventh, either.”

Adlet thought back. The story about the message had just been a thoughtless lie. But even if it was a lie, Adlet’s claims were hitting on truth. If they killed Fremy, they’d fall into Tgurneu’s trap. That part was true. He couldn’t retract his statement about the shining letters now and admit it was a lie. He had no choice but to stick to his story until the end.

Fremy said, “Just as the existence of that message can’t be proven true, it can’t be proven a lie, either. You can say whatever you want, but this argument will just go around in circles. It doesn’t even matter in the first place. I’m the Black Barrenbloom. Hans is trying to kill me, and you’re protecting me. That speaks louder than any other evidence.”

Adlet had known she would say that, so he chose his next words cautiously. “Would the Tgurneu you know have put together such a crude plan?”

“...Crude?” Fremy hesitated.

“Yeah, crude. Hans *is* a formidable man, but do you really think he could keep you safe all on his own? ...Oh, I see. You think I’m the seventh. So let me ask you the question this way: Do you think I could manage to protect you all by myself?”

“You’ve succeeded so far.”

“That’s been the outcome. But what if, when we first encountered Goldof and Nashetania, I hadn’t been able to stop them? What if Chamo had lost control and tried to kill you? What if none of the other Braves had believed you? They could have easily killed you. Having just one seventh there to protect you is an incredibly shaky strategy.”

“...So what?”

“Tgurneu set up a second plot—arranged things so that all the Braves will still die no matter what happens to you.”

“What?” said Hans. “If a plan like that exists, then do tell, *meow*. ”

Adlet smirked. “It was a mistake to allow me to talk, Hans—as it was a mistake to let Chamo go. You should’ve just ignored what I had to say and broken down the barrier.” Adlet was deliberately provoking him. But that didn’t bother Hans. He was still smiling.

“That’s not even worth considering,” Fremy spat. “If Tgurneu had some scheme that would destroy all the Braves upon my death, there’s no way I would still be alive. If Tgurneu intended to kill me, it would have had any number of ways to do it. All it would have to do is make you think I was contacting it, or maybe told you about the existence of the Black Barrenbloom, and I would be dead. But Tgurneu had you protect me and hid the existence of the Black Barrenbloom.”

Without missing a beat, Adlet shot back, “It would probably prefer to have you live and absorb the power of the crests. That’s why it didn’t target you and had another Brave protect you. But it still needed insurance in case you did die.”

“...”

“Tgurneu’s set up a scheme with two stages: If we failed to figure out about the Barrenbloom, it would absorb the power of the crests and all the Braves would die. And if we did figure it out, it planned to have the Braves kill Fremy and activate its second trap.

“Tgurneu and the seventh have switched plans now. It was either when we heard about Fremy’s identity from Rainer, or when you recalled that you’d

come to this temple a long time ago, or perhaps it was when Dozzu told us about the Temple of Fate. One of those.”

“...And?”

“Tgurneu didn’t anticipate this. Even though we now know for sure who the Barrenbloom is, you’re still alive, Fremy. The seventh figured their side could lose if we did as I suggested and choose to focus our full efforts on defeating Tgurneu. They wanted to squelch that one-in-a-million possibility.

“That’s why to the seventh—to Hans—I’m in the way. He stopped me and urged you to kill yourself. He erased the evidence I’d found, too. Then he insisted that I was the seventh to make you lose trust in me.”

“And where is the evidence that Tgurneu has a second plan?”

“The greatest piece of evidence is that message. There is one other clue, though. One of the lines in those hieroglyphs said a certain function would activate after your death. You saw that for yourself.” Adlet showed them the wound on his left leg. “What’s more, I was just attacked by a fiend, after I took Mora hostage. It tried to peel me and Mora apart. That’s proof the fiends were trying to get in my way.”

“Mora said she didn’t see any enemies,” said Fremy.

“I don’t know why she failed to notice it. I really doubt she’d be communicating with the enemy, either.”

“If there was a hidden power in the Black Barrenbloom—a second trap—we would have found it when we were deciphering the hieroglyphs.”

“You think Tgurneu would make a mistake like that? It was prepared for the possibility that this temple would be discovered, too. In fact, the second trap exists entirely for the sake of this very situation.”

Fremy fell silent.

“It’s true that I have no proof. But you should understand from my explanation that it’s too early to conclude that you need to die and I’m the seventh. Fremy, wait before you kill yourself. If you decide to stay alive, I’ll take down the barrier immediately and release Mora.”

Adlet shot Fremy a hard look in the eye. She wasn't that soft, and he knew this wasn't enough to gain her trust. But this should be enough to weaken her certainty that he was the seventh. She'd believe he was suspicious, but she wouldn't yet be certain. She could trust him that much.

Adlet patiently waited for Fremy to reply.

Once Adlet was done talking, Fremy surveyed the others. Hans was silently watching the situation, while Rolonia seemed to be hoping that Fremy would be convinced.

"That wasn't even worth listening to." Fremy cut him down with a single line.

Rolonia yelled, "Wh-why?!"

Fremy spoke not to the despairing boy but to Rolonia. She had to explain this, or Rolonia would never been convinced. She trusted Adlet entirely.

"The evidence for this second trap is too slim. It's not worth considering. I can't imagine it's anything but a spur-of-the-moment lie. And besides, his talk of Hans protecting me is a strained interpretation of what's happened."

"But...!"

"I..." Fremy hesitated. She looked over at Adlet, who was gazing at her with affection, just like he always had, since they first met. She averted her eyes.

Before they had come to the Howling Vilelands, Fremy had always believed that she wouldn't mind dying for victory. She'd felt that as long as she could take Tgurneu down with her, that would be enough. If all the other Braves were in danger of being killed, she felt perhaps she could die to keep them safe and entrust her revenge to them. She'd never meant to stay alive in the first place; she wanted to throw her life away, if she could.

But she hadn't. Even in moments of crisis, she hadn't even considered sacrificing herself. They had encountered Tgurneu twice: when they'd entered the Howling Vilelands and again when they'd been chasing Goldof around. Fremy could have blown herself up and taken Tgurneu with her both times. But she hadn't—even though when she'd first come to the Howling Vilelands, she would have been able to do so without hesitation.

Fremy understood the reason why.

“It was because Adlet was here that I’ve stayed alive all this time,” she said.

She’d known he was lying. She’d known that in his heart, he had to hate her. But even so, hearing him say all those things had made her happy. Even if it wasn’t true, she’d been glad to hear he wanted to protect her and bring her happiness. Fremy had wanted to be deceived for as long as possible. Only when she’d listened to him talk had she felt like something other than an unlovable monster, like she had permission to be alive—even if she knew that was a lie.

That was exactly why Fremy had stayed alive, and exactly why she hated him. She was angry with Adlet for making her want to live. “What Hans has done is trivial,” she said. “Adlet was the only one who really protected me. If he wasn’t around, I would have died long ago.”

If Hans was the seventh and trying to protect her, he would have made her want to live—just as Adlet had. But Hans hadn’t done anything. He had simply treated her like another person with a mutual foe, and another suspect who could be the seventh. He wasn’t like Adlet.

“That’s exactly why I can say with certainty that you’re the seventh, Adlet. You took care of me and ensured I would live. No one else could possibly be the seventh.”

Fremy fired a bullet. The film of light wobbled violently again, but even her gun would still take some time to break the barrier.

“...This is the worst,” Adlet muttered as he watched the rippling light. He’d gone so far into despair, he’d come out the other end to smile.

Adlet had been desperately trying to protect Fremy all this time. Out of a desire to soothe her suffering, he’d sworn he would make her happy. And that was exactly why she didn’t trust him now. The stronger his feelings for her got, the more she lost trust in him. The more he talked about his affection for her, the further away her heart drifted. How could it get worse than this?

But he still couldn’t let himself give up. Adlet turned his gaze on Rolonia, who was frozen, stunned.

I’m helpless, Rolonia thought as she watched Fremy firing continuously at the

barrier. *There's no way Addy is the fake. I can't let Fremy die.* But even knowing that, she couldn't do anything. She couldn't even stop Fremy from trying to break down the barrier.

Now Adlet turned to Rolonia and said, "Rolonia! Go look for proof! Go find some evidence that what I'm saying is true!"

Adlet's words left Rolonia at a loss. What should she look for? And where? "Th-the glowing message?"

He shook his head. "No. Look for the enemy. There's a fiend hiding in this temple. It came to me once and then vanished. It's planning something—trying to get rid of me and make sure Fremy dies."

There's no way, Rolonia thought. She didn't even know the way around this labyrinth. She doubted she could find a fiend that could hide from Mora's clairvoyance.

"Find it and figure out what it's after. Find proof that the fiends are trying to kill Fremy. That's the only way to make the truth clear. Once we all know the fiends are trying to kill Fremy, we can stop her from killing herself. Get help from Chamo, and you can get Dozzu and Goldof to join in, too. You're the only one who can do it now."

Slow as she was, Rolonia knew that was the only option. She also knew there was no way to stop Fremy and the others besides finding some kind of proof to clear their suspicions.

"It's a trap, Rolonia. Adlet could be trying to kill you. Stay here," Fremy ordered.

But Rolonia couldn't just stand there and do nothing but panic. She turned away from the dead-end hallway, ready to dash off.

"Nope."

But that was when Hans stopped merely watching events unfold, and acted. When Rolonia started running off, he blocked her way. In a heartbeat, he closed the distance between them and raised his sword before her face.

She wasn't even able to react. "H-Hans..."

“I get what yer up to, Adlet,” said Hans. “You’ve set up somethin’ somewhere—proof that you ain’t the seventh. Proof that it’s me. Proof that we can’t kill Fremy.”

Inside the barrier, Adlet was grinding his teeth. He couldn’t save himself now. Rolonia was just trembling before Hans’s sword.

“I can’t just stand there and watch while Rolonia goes off to find it. I ain’t goin’ that easy on ya.”

“...Go, Rolonia. Don’t bother with Hans. He’s scared you’ll find proof! He’s just trying to stop you from revealing the truth!” Adlet yelled.

Right then, Fremy fired a bullet that passed through the film of light, skimming Adlet’s cheek. At this rate, Adlet would die. *I have to stop Fremy and Hans*, Rolonia thought. But with Hans’s sword pointed at her, she couldn’t move. If she were to take a single step or reach out to her whip, she would instantly be cut down.

Pathetic. And you call yourself a Brave? Rolonia told herself as she stood there frozen. *You have to protect Addy. When you saw him lose Rainer, you swore you’d support him. But now you can’t do anything.*

Fremy doesn’t matter. You just have to protect Addy.

It was then that Rolonia felt something off. She’d just had a strange thought. But she never figured out why.

The fiends were at work trying to kill Fremy, Adlet was certain. Rolonia would be able to reveal their goals and the steps they were taking. He trusted her. She was more than just a timid girl.

But their avenues were being cut off one after another, and Adlet trembled in impatience. He knew there was no way for him to win over Fremy until they found solid evidence. And if Rolonia was pinned down, then there was nothing more he could do.

Hans. He had to do something about Hans, or he couldn’t protect Fremy.

Suddenly, a slave-fiend turned the corner and approached them. It had a note stuck to its head.

“It’s a message from Chamo.” Hans tore it off and read it, but he revealed no weaknesses, refusing to let Rolonia take even a step. Once Hans had scanned the note, he crushed it up and threw it away.

“What is it, Hans?” asked Fremy.

“Tgurneu’s forces ain’t here yet. No problems,” said Hans. That was good news, but nothing about the situation had been resolved.

That was when Adlet suddenly grimaced. A spike of pain shot through his head, and he realized it had been hurting for a while now. *Is it an enemy attack?* he thought. It could be poison, or a sound wave attack, or something else. He doubted it was Hans or Fremy. So then, was it a fiend?

Adlet peered very closely at what was behind them, thinking a fiend could be hidden there. But he couldn’t see anything.

The prickling pain in his head was gradually getting stronger. Adlet couldn’t guess at what was happening—and so time passed.

At knifepoint, Rolonia continued to think about protecting Adlet, and changing this situation. She had to do something. If she stayed helpless now, being chosen as a Brave of the Six Flowers would be meaningless.

Adlet’s headache was gradually growing worse. He was certain it was more than his imagination or caused by exhaustion. This was an offensive move. “... Rolonia, Fremy, watch out. A fiend is attacking us,” he said.

Rolonia looked around the area, but Fremy ignored him and continued shooting.

“A-attack?” stuttered Rolonia.

“I don’t know quite what it is. It’s poison, maybe sound waves—I can’t see anything. It’s just that my head hurts.”

“That’s a head cold, *meow*. Best to warm up and have a nap,” Hans said with a smile. Rolonia became even more upset.

“You guys can’t feel anything?” said Adlet. “This is strange. This isn’t an ability of a known fiend.” Once, his master Atreau had taught him about various fiend skills. He couldn’t think of any like this. *It could be one of those specialists doing*

it. So they've finally come to kill me for real? They're gonna take me out by any means necessary because I'm protecting Fremy? The situation was just getting worse and worse.

"Wh-what should we do, Addy? Urk..." Rolonia was confused.

But Hans was smiling. "Now yer pretendin' yer head hurts? *Hrmeow*, whatcha schemin' now, Adlet?"

Don't give me that crap, Hans. It really hurts. The pain was becoming so strong, he wasn't paying any more attention to his left arm, holding Mora.

Then, as if she'd made up her mind about something, Rolonia said, "...Hans, Fremy, p-please listen. I have a suggestion. Addy...you listen, too."

Fremy stopped shooting, and the smile dropped from Hans's face for just one second.

"Our number-one priority is to save Mora, and then I die," Fremy said. "We don't have the time to be listening to your suggestions." She was about to start firing at the barrier again, but suddenly a sound in the narrow hallway of the labyrinth echoed with the sharp crack of something slicing through the air.

Rolonia was swinging her whip to hit Fremy's hand right before she could pull the trigger.

"...What do you think you're doing, Rolonia?" Fremy's hand wasn't injured. Rolonia had only hit her lightly.

"J-just wait a second, Fremy. It's not like I can't do anything, and it's not like I'm...not thinking, either."

Fremy was about to retort when Hans stopped her. He drew his sword away from Rolonia. "I'll listen, *meow*. It is a suggestion from a valued ally."

"...I—I can't fight...with y-y-you, Hans. I...have no idea who...the seventh is."

Hans quietly moved away from Rolonia.

"Believe me, Rolonia, he's the seventh," said Adlet.

But Rolonia shook her head. "You can say that, but I don't know... There's no way I can find proof."

“But...you’re the only one I’ve got.”

Whip raised, Rolonia faced Adlet. “Addy, release Lady Mora.”

Adlet was surprised. Would even Rolonia endorse killing Fremy?

“It’s okay. I’m not going to betray you, Addy. I’ll be the hostage in Lady Mora’s place.”

This time, it was Hans’s and Fremy’s turn to be surprised.

“...What are you talking about, Rolonia?” asked Adlet.

“I can’t find that proof for you, Addy. But Lady Mora has her clairvoyance. She’ll be so much more helpful than I’d be, and she can find the fiend attacking you. I think that’s the best way to keep you safe, and Fremy, too,” Rolonia said to Adlet. Next, she turned to Hans and Fremy. “Fremy, Hans—Tgurneu could be coming closer. We need Lady Mora’s power. So it’s best to exchange hostages.”

“B-but—” Adlet tried to reply. This would only gain Adlet another enemy. He doubted Mora would take his side after being his hostage this whole time.

“If you don’t agree to it, I won’t forgive you, Addy. Not even you.”

Adlet was at a loss for words. This was the first time he’d ever seen Rolonia so angry.

“I can’t watch you hurting Lady Mora or Fremy hurting you anymore! I’ll be your hostage! So just stop attacking each other!”

“This is ridiculous, Rolonia,” said Fremy. “You’d just be giving him another hostage. If both you and Mora are killed, we won’t have any more healers!”

“I don’t care! I’m not listening!” Rolonia yelled. Her stubbornness bewildered both Fremy and Hans.

“Are you...serious?” asked Adlet.

“I won’t listen to what you say anymore, either, Addy. If you don’t let go of Lady Mora, I really will...get mad. I think...I’ll h-hit you, Addy.”

“Rolonia...” Adlet judged that he couldn’t convince her. He knew how strong she was at her core, hidden though it usually was.

It was indeed a gamble to release Mora, but Adlet supposed she wouldn’t

ignore what Adlet had to say entirely like Fremy and Hans were. Besides, with her clairvoyance, she might have been able to find evidence that the fiends and the seventh were trying to kill Fremy. This suggestion of hers was advantageous to Adlet.

“If you will me to come in, Addy, I’ll be able to pass into the barrier. I know how Lady Mora makes them. Addy, let me in—and let go of her.”

“Fine.” Adlet did as told and willed for the barrier to let Rolonia through. He didn’t really know how to do it, but it was probably enough just to think it.

Rolonia approached them, and it was then that Adlet realized something was odd about Hans’s behavior. Why didn’t he stop her when her proposal would work to Adlet’s advantage? Hans had noticed something. But while he was pondering Hans’s intentions, Rolonia had come into the barrier.

A split-second later, Rolonia’s whip struck at Adlet’s left arm, the one that held Mora. “Sorry, Addy,” she said. Adlet saw her eyes had lost the light of reason. He blocked her whip attack with his right shoulder.

“Fremy, kill yourself!” Rolonia yelled, following up with another strike.

Whät is the situation? specialist number fourteen thought to itself from its corner in the labyrinth. Without number thirty, it had no idea what was going on in the temple. The fight could be over, and it wouldn’t even know.

Fourteen was keeping hidden within the labyrinth. It was near the exit, in the middle of a path that lead to the depths.

About two hours earlier, the Braves had run right over its head. Slave-fiends had passed by it many times, too, but they hadn’t noticed it was there. Since fourteen was skilled at ambushes, that also meant it was good at hiding. Even now that its attack had begun, it was confident that absolutely no one could find it.

I nevér would’ve imagined the fäte of Tgurneu’s forces would lie with me.

Fourteen possessed an ability that, once activated, was terrifyingly powerful. On the other hand, there were many conditions to fulfill to be able to activate it, and its use was limited. It also took a long period of preparation.

The Braves were elusive, and it was difficult to predict where they would go, so there had been hardly any chances to ambush them. If they had been near a Bud of Eternity, the odds would have been good that the Braves would visit, but number fourteen's ability wouldn't work within the barrier.

When this battle had first begun, Tgurneu had ordered number fourteen to lay in wait near a tiny hut on the edge of the Fainting Mountains. But it had seemed unlikely the Six Braves would visit there, much less stay long enough for the fiend to activate its ability. Fourteen had half given up, figuring the fight would end before it could be of much use.

Then, half a day ago, it had received a report that the Braves of the Six Flowers were headed for the Fainting Mountains. Number fourteen had been told about the temple and ordered to attack the Six Braves inside the labyrinth, so it had hastened to hide itself in the temple and await the arrival of the Six Braves.

Number fourteen's power was a sort of hypnotism. It would disseminate a special substance throughout the whole area that acted on the human brain as it simultaneously emitted an extremely minute sound wave imperceptible even to other fiends. In principle, it was similar to the stealth ability, but it was far more powerful.

It was the only one of the specialists that was capable of controlling human minds.

It created the desire to kill within human hearts.

Those affected by the ability wouldn't even realize they were being controlled until they had the unbearable urge to kill the subject number fourteen selected. *Kill Fremy.* That was the instruction number fourteen had received from number thirty. Thirty knew that Chamo, Hans, Mora, and Goldof wanted Fremy to die, while Adlet and Rolonia were trying to protect her. Number fourteen had been targeting Adlet and Rolonia with its sound waves so that both would feel the urge to kill Fremy.

As Rolonia swung her whip, she saw Adlet's eyes were wide in shock.

Addy must not have even imagined that I'd trick him, huh? Rolonia thought. She hadn't even imagined herself that the time would come when she would lie

to him. Hans and Fremy had to have been surprised, too. Rolonia couldn't turn to look behind her, but they had to have been watching her in disbelief.

"Ngh!" Adlet blocked the attack with his shoulder. Rolonia felt guilty for injuring him, but she couldn't allow herself to stop. Her target was Adlet's left arm, holding Mora. Killing him was out of the question, and she wanted to avoid injuring him as much as possible. Freeing Mora was her only goal.

Rolonia didn't believe for a minute that he was the seventh. She'd made up her mind to believe in Adlet to the end, even if the world was destroyed. But what he was doing right then was wrong. *There's no way that killing Fremy is a trap. Addy's just got the wrong idea.* And even if it was a trap, Rolonia didn't care. No matter what scheme Tgurneu had in store for them, they just had to overcome it. *And I know Addy can do that.*

And most of all, I can't let Fremy live. She's the one causing all this confusion within us. She's the reason Addy's making bad decisions. She's making us fight with one another. That has to be her goal.

At this rate, he's going to die. Fremy is going to kill him. If she kills herself, or if Hans kills her, then the whole situation will be resolved.

"Let go of Lady Mora!" Rolonia continued her attack, aiming for Adlet's left arm.

Rolonia felt no doubts about her actions. The only thing on her mind was protecting Adlet. She believed she just needed Fremy gone to keep Adlet safe. Her belief in that fact was unshakable.

Number fourteen knew the humans it controlled would never notice that their urges to kill had been planted there by someone else. They would justify it in their heads without a shadow of a doubt.

In order to control humans, number fourteen first had to make sure they absorbed the nerve toxin emitted from its body. It took at least six hours to spread the toxin around a given area, and about two more hours on top of that until it affected the targets. And now, it had taken effect. The Six Braves had been defenselessly breathing the poisonous air this whole time.

Once the toxin was absorbed, number fourteen could implant the urge to kill

by emitting a unique sound wave from its body. The sound differed for each individual it controlled, and the fiend would know the frequency just by visually confirming its target once. Controlling a target via sound wave was also not doable in an instant. The more targets there were, the more time it took to implant the urge to kill within them.

“Is it possible to control all the humans in the labyrinth, all seven of them?” number thirty had asked a little while earlier.

“It’s possible. But it will take two hours,” number fourteen replied.

“The fight will be over by then. How many can you control in ten minutes?”

“...At most, two.”

Number thirty considered the idea for a while, then ordered number fourteen to implant the urge to kill in Adlet and Rolonia. Fourteen found this odd. It had heard they were the weakest of the Six Braves. If you were going to control anyone, shouldn’t they be going for the strongest?

“Those are the only two protecting Fremy. If you control them, we can kill her.”

Number fourteen gave its acknowledgment. It trusted number thirty’s judgment, since it possessed greater intellect.

Once, number fourteen had destroyed numerous human villages with its powers. It would infiltrate a village ahead of time to amplify the urges to kill over the course of a few days. It would sow discord among friends and cause the villagers to lose their sense of unity and normal powers of judgment. Then Tgurneu would come in, guilefully manipulating the people into obeying its orders.

It had destroyed Adlet Mayer’s home, too. Now it could finally finish off the boy it had failed to kill back then. Number fourteen found this quite gratifying.

No other specialist possessed such a complex and high-level ability. Most likely, no other fiend, past or present, had ever been able to do something similar, either. It was completely impossible for any fiend to attain on its own.

It was all thanks to Tgurneu. More than one hundred years ago, the

commander had ordered number fourteen to develop the power to control humans. It had also given detailed instructions as to the evolutionary process that would grant such an ability, and then how to use it.

Tgurneu most likely possessed a similar ability itself and was keeping it secret from its subordinates, number fourteen figured. Tgurneu could never have given those instructions otherwise. Number fourteen didn't know the full particulars of Tgurneu's ability, and it had never asked. Of course, Tgurneu had never spoken of its own abilities to other fiends, not even once.

Adlet had not anticipated that Rolonia would betray him. He'd believed she would do as he said, right up until the end. He didn't wonder if he was naive to have believed that about her. The look in her eyes wasn't normal, nor were her actions. Adlet figured she'd lost her normal powers of judgment.

"Addy! Don't try to dodge!" Rolonia yelled as she mercilessly targeted the arm holding Mora. As he avoided her attacks, Adlet looked to Fremy and Hans.

Fremy's eyes were opened wide in disbelief, but the look on Hans's face was saying *Yep, there she goes*. Hans had anticipated that Rolonia would betray Adlet, and he was in position to aim for Fremy's neck, too.

At this rate, if Rolonia persisted in her onslaught and Adlet continued to leave himself open, Hans would kill Fremy. He was certain of that. Hans was already willing to sacrifice Mora's life.

Adlet deliberately blocked Rolonia's attacks with his own body. Blood spurted from his face and his arm, which distressed Rolonia. Instantly, he threw away his knife and, faster than the eye could see, grabbed something out from under his belt with his left hand. It was a bomb. He pulled out the retaining pin halfway. "Stop, Rolonia! If you attack now, I'll blow us all to pieces, Mora included!" Adlet supported the half-removed pin with his fingertip. If he decided to blow himself up, it would be instantaneous.

"Hans! Wait!" Fremy cried.

Hans took the opportunity to slice at Fremy, and she evaded it by barely an inch. "...*Hrmeow*. Don't dodge, Fremy."

"If I die now, Mora won't be the only one to die. Rolonia's life will be in

danger, too.”

Not knowing how to continue, Rolonia stopped. A cold sweat had broken out on Adlet’s forehead. If she had hit him in the wrong spot, he could have dropped the bomb and blown himself up. But even worse, if Adlet had been too slow in judging when to take out the bomb, Fremy would have died.

“Fremy,” said Rolonia, “you’re not dead? Why not?”

“...You’re in danger, Rolonia,” Fremy replied.

“That doesn’t matter. Please hurry up and die, Fremy. I can’t protect Addy if you don’t.”

What are you talking about? There really was something strange about Rolonia’s behavior.

That was when his headache, which had calmed a bit, got worse again. This time, the pain was so fierce he wanted to scream. And with the ache came a voice whispering from deep in his mind. *Give up. Let Fremy die.* It was a mysterious voice, seemingly both his own and a foreign whisper.

“Wh-what the hell?”

But no matter how much it hurt, Adlet couldn’t stop fighting. He pulled the chain with handcuffs on it from one of his waist pouches and connected his own left arm to Mora’s right, ensuring that they couldn’t be torn apart. “I’ll say this just one more time, Rolonia. Stop attacking me. Don’t say anything—just leave the barrier,” said Adlet.

But then, from the depths of his mind, the voice sounded again. It said, *Let Fremy die. Give up.* It urged his heart like a strict father who would not tolerate disobedience.

Adlet understood this was a fiend’s attack. The one that attacked human minds really did exist. Was it Tgurneu? Or was there some other fiend with this capacity?

“Addy, why?” said Rolonia. “Is Fremy that important to you? Do you have to go that far to protect her?”

“Yeah, I do!” Adlet took advantage of Rolonia’s hesitation to body-slam her in

an attempt to push her out of the barrier. In her fear of the bomb, Rolonia couldn't put up much of a fight.

"Go fer the stake, Rolonia," Hans said quietly.

The instant before Adlet pushed her out of the barrier, she swung her whip. He grabbed her right arm, avoiding her weapon as he shoved her away until both her body and the handle of her whip were out of the barrier. Simultaneously, there came a shrill, metallic noise, and her whole whip was tossed outside, too.

But that very instant, Adlet noticed a large nick on the stake at his feet.

Even though it was under no attack, the film of light swayed wildly, and he could tell it was gradually thinning.

Earlier, just a little while after Adlet had taken Mora hostage, Nashetania had walked through the labyrinth alone. Her pace was leisurely; nothing suggested Chamo was pursuing her.

She was near the exit to the labyrinth. Chamo's slave-fiends were off searching in the wrong direction. Nashetania had always been good at running away. Even Chamo, Mora, and Hans together hadn't been able to catch her. In this complex labyrinth, it wasn't a difficult task for her to evade pursuit.

"Hmm, this is a problem. How do I speak to them?" Nashetania muttered as she scratched her head with her only hand. "Do they not hear me? Or must I use some other method to communicate with them? Hellooo, kind fiend. I'm right here. Won't you allow me to cooperate with you?" Nashetania kept on calling out quietly enough that Chamo wouldn't find out.

"You don't need tó worry. I cän hear." A voice came from near Nashetania's feet then. A mouth had opened in the flagstones.

"Oh my. The power to transform into the stone floor? So that was why even Lady Mora didn't notice you, hmm?" Nashetania grinned.

"What dó you mean by *cooperate*?" asked the flagstones—specialist number thirty.

"You have some way to kill the Braves of the Six Flowers, don't you? If you

need my help, I'll cooperate with you. Since they're our common enemy, I figured there would be nothing stopping us from working together."

After some thought, number thirty replied, "Weren't you in an alliance with them?"

"We were. But that's long since served its purpose. All we needed was protection on our way to this temple. Now they're only in our way."

Number thirty considered.

"Would you give us a hand, too, in exchange?" Nashetania continued. "We also have a task to complete in this temple. However, Goldof has Dozzu under observation, which prevents our goal from being accomplished here. I figured we should work together."

"That's out of the question. Why would I help out that shameful traitor to fiendkind?"

"I see... That's too bad. If that's the case, then I'm forced to leave betraying and killing the Braves to our next opportunity. And I'll come up with another way to accomplish my goal," Nashetania said, smiling at number thirty. "I've decided I'll go back to Goldof and Dozzu and tell them I deceived a fiend into casually revealing itself to me, and then killed it."

Number thirty was choked. "...W-wait...you weren't lying about...killing the Six Braves, right?"

"No, of course not."

"...I'll cooperate with you. But what can you do for us?"

"We'll eliminate whoever is the greatest impediment to your goals. Now that they're fighting among themselves, it will be easy."

Number thirty's silence was proof of its lingering doubts.

"Whom shall I kill? Hans? Or Chamo?"

"No, Fremy is the one to kill. Adlet has taken a hostage to force Fremy to desist from killing herself. You kill her."

Nashetania smiled. "Understood. After that, I'll kill Adlet, too. I've always

wanted revenge against him.”

The earth shook under the march of hundreds of fiends. In the center of them all, Tgurneu was looking up at the sky. “I’d give it another three hours,” it muttered.

Chapter 5
Turning
Point



Chapter 5

Turning Point

Riding her slug, Chamo rolled up the hem of her skirt. The Crest of the Six Flowers on her thigh still had all its petals. “So Auntie is safe, huh? But Fremy’s not dead yet, either.”

A slave-fiend ran up to her then. Chamo put her ear to its mouth and listened to it speak.

“...Roger. It’s not Tgurneu’s main forces, huh? It’s just some we missed killing.” Chamo pulled some paper and a charcoal pen out of her bag and wrote: Fiends have come to the temple. Probably about ten. Tgurneu’s main forces aren’t here yet.

“Hand this to the catboy. You know where he is, right? Don’t get lost.”

She sent out the slave-fiend and continued her search.

“You’ve managed to gather ten? That will be enough to succeed,” said Nashetania.

Number thirty had left the temple for a bit to go summon the surviving fiends in the area. All they had here were low-grade fiends, but Nashetania said that was enough. She demanded that her own request be granted first, before killing Fremy. Number thirty had accepted her terms and gathered the fiends as instructed.

Chamo’s search of the labyrinth with her “pets” wasn’t a concern for them anymore. Number thirty could hear where every slave-fiend in the labyrinth was. It had been simple enough to help Nashetania evade Chamo and gather allies in the labyrinth.

“You leave the läbyrinth and go tell Cómmander Tgurneu the situación.” Only two of the fiends number thirty had brought here had any brains, so it instructed them to act as its messengers. Number thirty was now giving one of them instructions—in code, of course. “<It’s no longer possible to prótect the Black Barrenbloom. The seventh has prësently decided to abandon it.>”

“Oh my, are we having a secret conversation?” Nashetania complained.

Number thirty ignored her. “<Côoperate with Nashetania to éliminate the Black Barrenbloom. After that, induce the Braves to kill Nashetania. The plan is to énect the strategy the seventh entrusted to us at the same time.>” It told the fiend about a path it could use to avoid Chamo’s slave-fiends on its way out of the temple, and the fiend quietly left.

“Couldn’t you tell me what it was you were talking about there? We’re in an alliance now.” Nashetania smiled kindly.

That smile would probably have moved a human’s heart, but it didn’t work on number thirty. “Now thén, Nashetania. Whät do we do?” it said.

Nashetania nodded in response and gave them instructions.

Goldof continued his solo watch on Dozzu. The commander showed no indication at all that it would move, and it didn’t speak to Goldof, either. When Goldof asked what Dozzu was plotting, the fiend merely evaded the question.

Nashetania had disappeared. Would she come attack Goldof now? Or would she try to win him over? He continued to stay on guard, but she never showed up, and neither did she sneak up on him. The fact that she wasn’t doing anything was even more unnerving than if she had been.

Suddenly, Dozzu said, “...Goldof. The enemy.”

“What?” But Goldof had heard it, too—the sound of fiends’ footsteps. *It can’t be. Have Tgurneu’s forces arrived?* he thought, rattled.

Four enemies came charging in from the other side of the labyrinth. Goldof drew his spear and fought them off; they didn’t pose a serious threat.

“I doubt these are Tgurneu’s main forces,” said Dozzu. “They’re just minor fiends.”

Dozzu’s lightning and Goldof’s spear made short work of the fiends. But they weren’t trying to evade Goldof’s attacks at all, instead charging straight toward him—until one passed right by Goldof and Dozzu, heading for the iron door.

Goldof had deliberately left that door open to prevent Nashetania from sneaking in. There was a chance that she could break into the room through the

ceiling or walls, so he had to continuously monitor the inside.

Goldof threw a dagger into a fiend. The wound was fatal, and it fell.

Sensing that the enemy's goal wasn't them, Goldof took up position in front of the open iron door.

"They're heading for the Saint of the Single Flower?" said Dozzu. "Whatever could their target be?"

It helped fight off the three remaining enemies.

Maybe these fiends are Dozzu's subordinates, Goldof thought. It had said they'd all been killed, but there was no guarantee that was true.

Then Goldof's ears picked up on a strange noise coming from the ceiling of the Saint of the Single Flower's room. *This is bad*, he thought. The enemy was trying to break in through the ceiling. "Dozzu...protect...that area. Absolutely...do not approach...the Saint of the Single Flower." Goldof couldn't let anyone touch the Saint, be they Tgurneu's or Dozzu's.

Goldof entered the room to kill an enemy that had come down from the ceiling.

There was more than one hole above now. The second was at the back of the room. Goldof faced the enemy descending from it, but another fiend appeared from the first hole at the same time. Both rushed toward the Saint of the Single Flower together.

"Watch out!" Dozzu called out as it fired off a lightning strike. The invaders were struck down in a single blow—but then an attack from behind sent Dozzu flying.

"!" The small body flew a few dozen yards and rolled into the room, but the fiend immediately got up again to run outside. Goldof felt a sudden horror for an instant, thinking that perhaps it had deliberately taken that hit so as to roll into the room. But from what Goldof could see of Dozzu's actions just then, it had done nothing to the Saint of the Single Flower.

"Don't be distracted, Goldof. They might be minor fiends, but they're still capable of killing you if you let them," said Dozzu, reminding him that the battle

was not yet over. Dozzu stood in front of the room, while Goldof continued to protect the Saint of the Single Flower.

Fiendish cries and footsteps were sounding somewhere. More were still alive, waiting for Goldof and Dozzu to leave. All they could do was wait and see what the enemy would do.

That was when a water snake–fiend arrived. Dozzu attacked it, but Goldof realized it was one of Chamo’s.

“That’s...Chamo’s slave-fiend. Don’t attack it... It’s carrying something...too.”

Goldof approached the slave-fiend and took the note pasted on its face.

Invaders. About ten minor fiends. Don’t think they’re Tgurneu’s main forces. Forgot to tell you.

The knight was a little exasperated, but it didn’t seem to be a matter of grave concern, so he was relieved for the time being. But what did they want? Anxious, Goldof continued to be on the ready for enemy attacks.

“They’ve probably succeeded,” Nashetania muttered in another corner of the labyrinth. Number thirty had listened to how the battle had gone and relayed the report to her.

“Is that enough?”

“All Dozzu needed to do was be near the Saint of the Single Flower for an instant. That will be enough to accomplish our goal. He did well. I doubt Goldof realizes what we’ve done, either.” Nashetania nodded in satisfaction. “I will go make sure Dozzu has accomplished that goal, and once I’m done, I’ll cooperate with your plans.” Nashetania started walking.

There was one more fiend behind her. It had not participated in the battle, working only as a messenger. As number thirty watched Nashetania go, it gave another coded command. “<Tell this to number fourteen, located at the five-way junction near the entrance to the labyrinth. You won’t be able to find it, but number fourteen will reveal itself to you. Tell it to kill Fremy as soon as possible. Though it’s unlikely, there’s the risk that Adlet will kill himself and take the seventh with him. Only the seventh knows how to do the transfer. We can’t löse our insider.>”

The fiend nodded and ran off. Nashetania walked on without a word.

Fremy saw that the barrier protecting Adlet was thinning. Once it was gone, it would be much easier to take Mora back. Thanks to Rolonia, the tides had turned.

But Fremy was bewildered by the sudden betrayal. Fremy had believed she would do what Adlet said, no matter what, and had half given up trying to convince her of anything. She remembered just how serious Rolonia had been about protecting her not so long ago, and how desperately she had fled Chamo and attempted to talk the gunner out of killing herself. In light of that, her current behavior made no sense.

Fremy shot Hans a sidelong glance. He appeared to have predicted Rolonia's betrayal, but even he was showing signs of confusion. He couldn't understand why Rolonia had suddenly changed her mind apparently.

"Wait, Rolonia, Fremy, the enemy...ngahhh!" Then Adlet began writhing in agony.

Is this another act? Fremy thought. But his expression was tense. It didn't look as if he was faking it.

"I...know how the enemy's attacking us!" Adlet yelled. "There's a voice inside my head. 'Kill her,' it says. It's messing with my mind, Fremy. It's screaming at me to let you die, and it's all I can do to resist it. This fiend can affect minds. Probably hypnosis of some kind. It's controlling Rolonia with its powers. And me, too. They're using us to kill you, Fremy!"

"...You're...lying," Fremy replied. But she had her doubts. There was what Rolonia had just done, and Adlet's behavior, too. After witnessing both, she couldn't say for sure that he was lying.

"I'm being controlled? ...Me?" Rolonia tilted her head as she looked at Adlet's suffering with concern.

"That's right, Rolonia. Calm down and take another good look at this situation! Snap out of it!" Even as Adlet spoke, the barrier continued to sway. "Rolonia, just a little while ago you were telling them to believe me, saying we couldn't let Fremy die. Remember that?!"

After thinking for a while, Rolonia said, “That’s not right. I *am* calm, and I’m not doing anything strange. There’s no way anything could be controlling me.”

Normally, Rolonia would believe Adlet , Fremy thought.

“That’s right—I want to protect you, Addy. I don’t want to let you die. If Fremy would just die instead, then we won’t have to kill you.”

“No! I just told you! The enemy wants us to kill Fremy! They’re trying to kill her right this minute! Calm down and think about it one more time!”

Rolonia shook her head. “No, Adlet. I can’t protect you if we don’t kill Fremy.” The whip moved, and Fremy reflexively jumped back.

The weapon had been aiming for her artery. If it had hit, Rolonia would have pulled blood from the wound until Fremy died.

“Wait. Saving Mora comes first,” said Fremy. The barrier hadn’t been entirely broken yet, and Adlet was holding a bomb with the retaining pin halfway out. She couldn’t die until they saved Mora.

“B-but...”

“You’re the one who said we can’t let Mora die.”

“...Y-yeah. I have to protect both Lady Mora and Addy. Umm...what should I do?”

This time Adlet called out to Fremy. “I know I told you that the enemy’s goal is to kill you, Fremy, and there’s a fiend attacking you right now. Do you still think I was lying?”

Adlet was the seventh, and everything he said was lies. Fremy was certain of that. But if so, then this situation didn’t make sense. She didn’t know what to do.

“Get out of here,” said Adlet. “Survive—while I can still hold on to my senses!”

The order echoing through Adlet’s skull was torturing him. *Kill Fremy*. That voice within him was becoming stronger and stronger. Continuously resisting the order was making him nauseous.

But now, things could change. Fremy had noticed that a fiend was attacking her. She had to get that if she died, they'd be falling for the enemy's plans. She wouldn't choose to kill herself anymore.

But that was when Hans said, "Is Rolonia really bein' controlled?"

Adlet wasn't the only one to be surprised by his remark. Fremy was, too.

"She might just be panickin' 'cause her beloved Addy is goin' to die."

"Hans," said Fremy, "Right now, Rolonia is clearly..."

"Under some kinda influence? So what?" Hans carelessly interrupted.

"...What?"

"It's simple. This is part of his plan, too. Ya get what that means, right, *meow*?"

Fremy considered for a while. Then she realized something, and her expression changed from confusion and bewilderment to hostility toward Adlet. "...I was careless. I didn't realize."

"Yep, Adlet, yer makin' some fiends attack Fremy. You ordered some hypnotist or somethin' to control Rolonia an' send 'em after Fremy. And I'm sure yer just pretendin' to be controlled, neow. Makin' fiends attack Fremy convinces her the enemy wants her dead, and she believes she has to avoid gettin' killed. And that's yer goal, ain't it?"

"Dozzu said that Tgurneu's subordinates weren't allowed to contact the seventh, but meowbe not all of 'em. This means some fiends kneow who the seventh is, and they'll take orders from 'im."

"C-cut the crap, Hans," Adlet said as he grimaced in pain. What an unbelievable man to bring them to this. Adlet was only just fully realizing what a formidable opponent he was.

"Don't let 'im trick ya, Fremy. This ain't fer real. The fiends are just pretendin' to try to kill ya."

"No! Hans, you're the one giving the fiends orders! They're not pretending to try to kill Fremy, they actually are! Don't let him fool you, Fremy!"

Fremy didn't reply.

"Hans ordered the fiends to kill you, and he wants you to think they're just pretending so he can pin the blame on me. You won't be defending yourself when they do kill you—that's his goal!" Adlet could see the barrier starting to fade. If Fremy would not respond to his attempts to convince her, then it might really be over now.

"Rolonia, you want to protect Adlet, *meow*?" Hans said.

Rolonia gave an agitated nod.

"Okay, I got it. Then I swear I won't kill 'im. I'll capture 'im and restrain 'im, probably hurt 'im a bit, but I swear I won't kill 'im. So work with me."

Rolonia considered the proposal a little, then nodded again. "Y-yeah. I understand. As long as Addy's safe, that's fine."

What are you talking about? Snap out of it! he thought, but he knew his words would no longer have any effect on Rolonia.

"Whaddaya think, Fremy? Do ya think some fiends are actually tryin' to kill ya?" Hans asked her, too.

After some consideration, Fremy pointed her gun at Adlet once more. "No. He is the seventh. There's no way they could be seriously trying to kill me."

So it's no use, Adlet lamented, right as the membrane of light before him disappeared entirely.

Seeing that the film was now gone, Fremy thought, *Now, this is checkmate*. Adlet had nearly managed to deceive her, but thanks to Hans, she'd escaped.

"Mew guys leave savin' Mora to me. If ya shoot or whip his left arm, he might blow himself up together with Mora. I'll steal away that bomb and toss it off into the hall," said Hans as he sheathed his swords, approaching Adlet. "Well, what I'd *really* like to do is kill Fremy right away. But I did just promise we'd save Mora."

Fremy kept her gun raised and pointed at Adlet.

"Fremy, gimme an opening to jump 'im. *Meow*, ya don't have to do the impossible, though. Rolonia, be ready to kill Fremy the instant I order it."

“Understood,” said Rolonia. “I’ll be sure to do it. But please don’t kill Addy, no matter what.”

“I’ll hurt ‘im, but I promise I won’t kill the guy. You can kill me if I break my promise.”

Rolonia nodded.

Now Adlet’s show of resistance was over—as was Fremy’s life.

She could finally die. Along with that relief, Fremy felt a momentary pang in her heart. It wasn’t that she feared death. She was a little confused, unsure of the reason behind the pain.

“Ya did good, Adlet. That was a pretty powerful speech just now, and it wasn’t a bad idea to make like you were gonna kill Fremy. Ya didn’t lose because yer weak. It’s just that once Fremy remembered she’s the Black Barrenbloom, it was already mewsless for ya to try.” Hands empty, Hans crouched down and looked for some kind of weakness in Adlet’s stance. No matter how good Hans was, it wouldn’t be so easy to pull this off. He’d have to steal the bomb from Adlet’s left hand in an instant, or they would all be blown up.

Even as Adlet grimaced in pain, he kept on glaring at Hans.

“I think you can cut the act. Yer not bein’ controlled.”

“...Shut the hell up, Hans.”

Would he leave Adlet alive, as he had promised? Well, Fremy doubted Hans would be able to go without doing him serious harm. Once Fremy was dead, he would either gouge out Adlet’s eyes or cut off his hands to prevent him from doing anything.

Fremy thought back on their fight so far. Every time Adlet had been in danger, she had felt pain in her heart. When Nashetania had nearly killed him, when Tgurneu had knocked him away, and when he had leaped into a group of Dead Host in order to save Rolonia, each time, Fremy had been worried and distressed. Perhaps the pain she felt now was just the same.

But that was irrational. Now that they had determined with certainty that Adlet was the seventh, it was ridiculous to feel like this. It was just because her

mind was more relaxed now that victory was almost certain. That was why she was having these strange thoughts. Telling herself that made her forget the pain in her chest.

“ ... ”

Then the quietest battle of all began. With about sixteen feet between them, Hans and Adlet’s gazes clashed. Hans was waiting for the instant Adlet’s guard slipped, while Adlet was on high alert to prevent Hans from stealing the bomb in his left hand. Time was on Hans’s side. Eventually, Mora would wake up. They didn’t know how long Adlet’s concentration would hold up, either. And as long as this battle went on, he couldn’t take one step out of the dead end.

A single gunshot tore through the silence. Fremy shot Adlet through the thigh, reckoning Hans would leap on that chance to steal the bomb away from Adlet.

“...Stubborn,” Fremy muttered. Hans hadn’t moved—and neither had Adlet. Adlet had withstood the pain of the bullet in his leg. He hadn’t given Hans even the slightest chance to steal the bomb from his left hand.

There’s no need to hesitate here , she thought, reloading her gun.

“Fremy, don’t,” Rolonia said from behind. She could feel Rolonia’s murderous aura from behind her.

“I won’t kill him. I’m just going to give Hans an opportunity to go after him,” said Fremy.

Rolonia was just itching to kill Fremy as soon as possible. *Something must be controlling her, after all.* But that was just a part of Adlet’s plan. If Fremy hesitated to die now, they would be falling into the enemy’s hands.

That was when she saw something.

Even as Adlet was grimacing in pain, he smiled.

His head throbbed. His leg ached. That voice was still echoing in his mind, telling him to let Fremy die. It was the most he could do to just resist the pain and the voice.

What’s more, Hans was right in front of him, looking for an opportunity to steal his bomb away. He couldn’t take his eyes off Hans or falter in his stance at

all.

Is this hell? Adlet wondered. When he was young, his sister had told him that it was a place the gods had made to punish evildoers. But Atreau had said that while gods and spirits do exist, heaven and hell were nothing more than fairy tales.

In his mind, Adlet called out. *Hey, Master, guess it really does exist. And, sis, tell me—have I done something this bad?*

He even wondered if, perhaps, Fremy had come to him to drag him to hell.

But even then, he didn't feel the slightest bit uncertain. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to make her happy, and his determination to do that was unwavering.

He may have exhausted all means at his disposal. He had no more allies to call on. And he couldn't think of anything else to do. But that was why he smiled. It's when you're in hell that you *have* to smile. That was the first thing that Atreau had taught him.

Though Fremy wanted to create an opportunity for Hans, she couldn't just fire randomly. She had to be cautious about attacking Adlet. Gun still up, Fremy continued to wait patiently.

He seemed to be in pain. Fremy knew that his story about a mind-controlling fiend attacking them was a lie. He was just making it seem as if the fiends were trying to kill her. But still, blood was flowing from the wound in his leg, wetting the flagstones. He had to be close to his limits.

But he was still smiling. Even as sweat was breaking out all over his body, he was smiling.

"...Meow , if it hurts that meowch, then why don't ya surrender?" Hans said, but Adlet didn't reply. All he did was concentrate on the hand that held the bomb.

How can he smile like that? Does this mean he has some other trick up his sleeve? Fremy could say with certainty that he did not. She and Hans had him backed into a corner. Fremy didn't understand what that expression could mean.

And why would Adlet go this far to protect me, suffering and putting his life on the line to ensure I can keep mine? Are Tgurneu's orders that important to him? Is there value to him in throwing away everything in order to obey?

Various thoughts rose in Fremy's mind, but she discarded them all. It didn't matter what he was thinking, and Tgurneu and Adlet's relationship was of no concern to her. He was the seventh. Under Tgurneu's orders, he'd prevented her death. He'd continued to ensure that Fremy lived as he lied to her about loving her and wanting to keep her safe. That alone was certain. Nothing else mattered.

"Addy, stop it already. There's no reason to go this far for her," Rolonia said with some difficulty. "Fremy just has to die, and all this will be resolved. So give up, already."

Rolonia was being controlled by a fiend. But Adlet was the one who had ordered that.

"...Please," Rolonia said, moving her whip to wrap around Fremy's leg and restrain her. She must have wanted to eliminate even the slightest possibility that she could escape.

That was when Fremy began to have doubts. *Is he really pretending to try to kill me? Isn't this going too far for pretend?*

But she dismissed that doubt as soon as it emerged. How could she still be considering such nonsense? Adlet was the seventh. He had protected her under Tgurneu's orders. There was no other way to explain all his words and actions so far. He had to despise her. Just by existing, she was bound to destroy all the Braves of the Six Flowers. There was no way a real one would risk their life to protect her.

Don't waste your time thinking about it. Just focus on taking Adlet down, Fremy told herself.

"..." She formed some small bombs in her hand. A direct hit would hurt, but these bombs weren't powerful enough to kill him. It was also unlikely they'd trigger the one in Adlet's hand. If he could withstand a second bullet, then Fremy would scatter these at his feet. Unfortunately, Mora would be caught in the blast, too. She would be able to recover from these wounds, though, and

this would be sure to take Adlet's attention off Hans.

The moment Adlet went from smiling to slight grimace, Fremy shot him a second time, aiming for the same place as the last time. There was no way Adlet would be able to withstand both the bullet plus explosives at his feet. Hans would surely be able to steal his bomb from him.

"*Meow!*" Hans moved. Leaping just like a cat going for a mouse, he dashed in close to Adlet.

But even with Fremy's second bullet going through his leg, Adlet continued to resist the pain. He drew his sword with his free right hand and sliced as the other man came for him. Hans reacted, too, drawing one of his sheathed blades to repel Adlet's strike. But still, Adlet didn't let go of the weapon in his grasp.

"*Hrmeow!*" Hans raised his sword up high and brought it down on Adlet's left wrist. He must have decided that if he couldn't steal the bomb, his only choice was to cut off Adlet's whole hand.

Adlet took a step back, twisting to avoid the sword. It skimmed his side, slicing off a bunch of his belts with an accompanying spray of blood. Without the belt to hold them up, the pouches scattered around the area.

This is bad, thought Fremy. Both attacks had missed their mark. They'd given Adlet the time he needed to set off his bomb. Right as Adlet's finger moved, pulling the retaining pin out, Hans leaped far backward. That moment, Fremy held her breath, and the bomb fell to the ground.

It didn't blow up. Fremy realized it had been a bluff. Adlet had pulled out the fuse beforehand—though she didn't know when.

"Hans, watch out!" called Fremy.

In the same breath as Adlet discarded the bomb, he threw one needle at Rolonia and a second at Hans. Were they dosed with paralysis poison? An instant death toxin?

But Fremy was already throwing the tiny bombs she'd made at Adlet's feet to buy Hans some time for avoiding that needle. Fremy had figured Adlet would dodge the bombs, or maybe just ignore them and throw the needle at Hans. But Adlet did something unexpected. Unconcerned about the explosives, he took a

step forward to kick one of the pouches that lay on the ground. It hit the wall and then slid down to the floor as the bombs exploded at his feet. He jumped aside at the last instant and escaped the blast, but smoke was rising from his burned legs. Mora was also wounded in the blast.

“Ya blew it!” After his jump backward, Hans raised his sword again.

Adlet’s back hit the wall of the dead end, and he immediately pulled another bomb from a pouch that remained at his waist.

“...Darn it. I couldn’t kill her,” Rolonia muttered. Busy dodging Adlet’s needle, she’d lost her opportunity to take out Fremy.

Adlet had made it through—but there would be many more chances to attack him yet.

“*Meow.*” That was when one of the pouches lying on the ground caught Hans’s eye. It was the small bag Adlet had protected from Fremy’s bombs. She was curious about that, too. Why had Adlet tried to protect that bag?

Hans opened the bag cautiously with his foot so he could react, no matter what happened. When he saw what came out of it, he looked a little disappointed. “...What’s this?” he said, kicking the contents.

But Fremy’s eyes jerked toward the object from the pouch. She couldn’t tear them away.

There was no way Fremy could be mistaken about what it was. It was an object she had always kept on her person, ever since she was small. For a long time, she’d thought about throwing it away, but she hadn’t been able to do it, until she’d finally managed to deem it unnecessary.

Inside the pouch were the broken fragments of her dog whistle.

I’m an idiot , Adlet thought as he held the second bomb in his hand. It wasn’t the time to be thinking about that dog whistle. He should have used that moment to take Hans out with a paralysis needle. He probably wouldn’t have won the fight with that one attack, but he still should’ve given it a shot. Even if he did save the dog whistle, there was no point if Fremy was dead.

But that moment, Adlet’s eyes had instinctively sought for the pouch with the

dog whistle among the things strewn across the ground. When he'd seen the bombs rolling toward him, he'd kicked the pouch away without thinking. He hadn't even had the time to look where he'd kicked it. If he lost that dog whistle, he wouldn't be able to keep his promise anymore. If it was just broken, it could still be fixed. But if it were blasted to pieces, he'd be breaking the promise he'd made to Fremy just a few hours earlier. And he'd sworn he'd make sure she'd see her nameless dog again.

I couldn't do that. I'm the strongest man in the world, and I never break a promise. No matter what happens to me, I'll always protect Fremy. I swear I'll keep all my promises, and I swear I'll make Fremy happy.

"Hrmeow." Hans settled into his stance, ready to target Adlet again.

Not only had the situation not changed—it was getting worse. His legs ached with the burns from the blast.

But despite it all, Adlet kept on smiling.

Fremy just stared at the pieces of the dog whistle on the ground. Neither Hans nor Rolonia noticed what she was so fixated on, and Adlet wasn't able to look over at her.

"...Wh-why...?" Fremy muttered. Why had Adlet been holding on to those pieces of her whistle? Why had he protected them? A blast from those bombs could have lost him both his legs. The explosion had been small, so his injuries were minor, but he *could* have died. How could preserving a broken whistle be worth that risk?

Fremy was the only one looking at the fragments on the ground. The object meant nothing to anyone but her.

"I promise you: I'll make sure you see that dog again. I'm the strongest man in the world. I'd never break my promise."

Fremy recalled what Adlet had said to her a few hours earlier—the vow she'd believed was impossible to keep.

Why had he been carrying the pieces of that dog whistle? Was it a show to convince Fremy he wasn't going to break his promise? She could say with certainty the answer was no. She had only seen it because Hans had sliced

Adlet's side as Fremy threw her bombs. It absolutely had to be a coincidence.

So then, was he trying to use it in battle? What on earth for? What could a broken dog whistle do?

It couldn't be—was Adlet actually trying to keep his promise to her? There was no way. He was the seventh. He was using her to kill the Six Braves. That had to be his only goal.

Don't waste your time thinking about it , Fremy told herself. The whistle didn't matter. She'd already decided she didn't need it anymore and stomped on it. There was no need to think about why Adlet was holding on to it.

But still, Fremy couldn't tear her eyes off those fragments, because in them was the only lingering attachment to life that remained in her. That whistle was the one single treasure that she had left.

There's no way , Fremy thought. Why had Adlet picked it up and carried it around?

"Maybe it's a small gesture, but if that's what'll make you happy, I'll do everything I can to make it happen."

Adlet had tried to keep his promise. She could imagine that it had just been an attempt to gain her trust, an attempt to deceive her. But staring at that dog whistle, Fremy felt a different sort of emotion rising in her heart.

Adlet could feel that his willpower was almost spent. He knew soon he would be unable to bear it under the strain of constant concentration. He wanted to rest, just for a little bit. His body wanted to writhe in the pain it was suffering. He wanted to abandon himself to the voice in his mind telling him to let Fremy die. Adlet resisted the temptation as he continued his standoff with Hans.

This might...be it , thought Adlet. But he still didn't even consider giving up the fight. Even if he had no chance of winning, even if it was all for nothing, he would keep fighting—keep smiling.

Fremy had been certain Adlet was the seventh, using her in an attempt to kill all her allies. And it was impossible that reuniting her with her dog could have helped him win anything. But Adlet had still tried to keep that little promise he had made to her. He'd even risked his life in the process. This could be another

attempt to deceive her. But was there any meaning in committing to that lie to the point of risking his life? Fremy didn't understand him. She had no idea what he was thinking.

Fremy couldn't brush this off anymore. The dog whistle was irreplaceable to her. That tiny item had swayed her heart. That was the moment she realized how she really felt. She was glad—someone had kept her treasure safe.

"Meow , Adlet. Can I ask ya somethin'?"

Fremy had spent less than a minute in doubt. Meanwhile, Adlet and Hans had been facing off.

"What's funny enough to make ya smile like that?"

Adlet broke his silence for the first time in a long while. "...Oh yeah, it's 'cause I'm glad." It looked to Fremy like he was trying to boost his own morale.

"What're ya glad about?"

"How once this fight is over, Fremy might understand."

"Understand what?"

"Just how important she is to me."

When Fremy heard those words, she felt like something had opened in her heart. She arrived at a possibility she'd not even considered once.

Adlet hadn't been pretending to love her.

Maybe he really did care about her, from the bottom of his heart.

Her logic had denied it. She was a child born of a human and a fiend, a monster no one would love. People would only ever use her. Even if some would pretend to care about her, absolutely no one would ever do so in truth. Just her family, just like the old couple she'd met after she'd fled. That was why Adlet had to be the same. No matter what the reason, no matter what his goal, he had to be just feigning affection for the sake of his own goals.

But Fremy's heart understood. The conversations they'd shared and the looks he'd given her were whirling through her heart.

How much had Adlet treasured her, worried about her, prayed for her to

change her mind? How much had he wanted her to be happy? Like water overflowing from a dam, Adlet's feelings rushed into Fremy's heart, though not even a drop had reached her before.

How did I never realize? Fremy thought. The things Adlet had said were completely different from what her family had said. She really was important to him. "...Adlet," Fremy murmured quietly. Before she even thought about it, she was voicing the words that had to be said. "...I'm sorry."

What he had told her when they'd first met passed through Fremy's mind. *"I'm not the kind of guy who can just abandon one of my own when they need me."*

The claim she had rejected without a care was running through her thoughts, too. *"So I've decided to help you out."*

Then came that line Adlet always repeated. *"Don't worry—leave it to me. I'm the strongest man in the world."*

When she recalled the expression that always accompanied it, Fremy's lips moved without regard for her own will.

"...Save me," they said.

When those words left Fremy's mouth so suddenly, Adlet did hear it.

At first, he didn't understand what she meant. "...Ha-ha," he had laughed. *What the hell?* He was about to die, and Fremy didn't have a scratch on her. And she had been the one to give him half his wounds, too.

But her words revived his wilting spirit once more.

Rolonia, her whip around Fremy's leg, was stunned by Fremy's sudden declaration. It took her time to realize the gunner didn't want to die.

Hans turned around. He'd been looking calm all this time, but now he wore an expression of shock.

The fight lasted only an instant. All four moved at the same time, attacks crossing past one another.

This is my chance, thought Adlet.

Once Rolonia figured out that Fremy had gone over to Adlet's side, the first thing she did was disarm her. Her whip, wound around Fremy's left leg, lifted Fremy up into the air while the tip snapped at Fremy's gun, sending it clattering to the ground.

But at the same time, black powder was spraying from Fremy's left hand, and the gunpowder exploded in the air, wreathing both girls in flame.

"Ngh!"

It wasn't too much gunpowder, and neither Fremy nor Rolonia was hurt. Rolonia just flinched a bit. But during the blaze, Fremy kicked Rolonia's hand with her free foot, which loosened the whip around her other ankle for an instant. In midair, Fremy grabbed the whip to yank her leg free.

Rolonia's whip leaped again, this time to wrap around Fremy's whole body, not just her ankle. Fremy blocked the whip with her fist to escape its restraints.

Fremy hit the ground and moved straight into a leap for her fallen gun, simultaneously attempting to put some distance between her and Rolonia. Hans was in motion, too, throwing his sword at her without a moment's hesitation. The sword skimmed Fremy's wrist as she reached out for her gun, preventing her from picking it up. Rolonia took advantage of the pause to wrap her whip around Fremy's torso.

"Fremy!"

Right as Hans threw his sword, he was bending low to charge at Adlet, aiming for his wrist not with a fist or knife hand but with fingers swept to the side, like a scratching cat. Not only was Adlet wounded all over, he'd been distracted by Fremy, and he failed to block the swipe. Hans's fingers hit his wrist hard, knocking the bomb in Adlet's hand to the ground.

"Now! Kill Fremy!" Hans called to Rolonia. But the moment Hans knocked the bomb out of Adlet's grasp, his attention wavered from his opponent.

That was the moment Adlet had been waiting for. He had meant for Hans to go to the bomb—and leave an opening.

Adlet instantly removed the handcuff from his arm and released Mora, and as she was crumpling to the ground, he kicked her—at Hans.

“Hrmeow!” Hans, who’d been about to come grab Adlet, ended up with Mora weighing down on him. Meanwhile, Adlet rolled away to the side, while Hans swiftly sidestepped Mora’s unconscious body and tried to grab Adlet.

“I’m coming, Fremy!” Adlet yelled. “Watch out!” In the exact same instant, Fremy was flinging out her hand to grasp her fallen gun.

Adlet threw a pain needle at Rolonia’s face, and Rolonia screamed as she lost control of her whip. Fremy shot Hans’s thigh, and he fell to the ground. Fremy untangled herself from the lash around her stomach as Adlet hurriedly staggered toward Fremy. He came to stand in front of her, shielding her as she raised her gun to defend him.

As Fremy took aim at Rolonia, she wondered if this was really the right decision.

But she could no longer be certain that Adlet was the seventh. He wasn’t trying to use her. He hadn’t been protecting her under someone else’s orders. He’d honestly wanted to. Now that Fremy understood that, she couldn’t say for sure any longer that he wasn’t a real Brave.

Adlet had said the enemy wanted to let Fremy die, and that there was a second trap that would activate upon her death. But he was just guessing, and he had no proof.

It could just be a part of Tgurneu’s plot, making Fremy think there was a second trap in order to keep her alive. Fremy and Adlet could both be walking into Tgurneu’s hands. There was also still the possibility that Adlet was the seventh, after all, though his protection of Fremy had nothing to do with Tgurneu’s orders. But maybe that wasn’t the case.

What mattered most was that he was the first person to have ever loved her since she was born, and she just couldn’t ignore what he said. She figured she should continue to defer until she could guarantee she knew the truth—until she could confirm whether there really was a second trap and be sure what the fiends’ goal was.

I can’t allow myself to die , Fremy thought.

“Are you okay?!” Adlet yelled.

Fremy reached out to support him. It hurt him just to stand. “You’re the one who’s not okay.”

He knew that. The fiend’s attempts to control his mind were already unbearable, so much so that his vision was blurring from the headache. If his stomach wasn’t empty, he would have vomited long ago.

Kill Fremy. He knew instinctively that if he obeyed that order, he would be free.

His legs crumpled. Fremy took him in her arms.

Blood spurted from Rolonia’s cheek where Adlet’s needle had hit her. She was using her power as the Saint of Spilled Blood to instantly detoxify herself. Hans was getting up, hopping on only one leg in his fighting stance. With the way he used all four limbs to move around, one wounded leg was trivial to him.

“I’m sorry, Hans. I’ll wait a little longer to die,” Fremy said, gun up.

“This is a little unexpected. What’s goin’ on? Suddenly got cold feet?”

“Relax. I’m not allying myself with the fiends. I’ve just decided that I want to verify the truth for myself.”

“Weren’t ya certain that Adlet’s the seventh?”

“I don’t know. It’s not so clear to me now.”

Listening to Fremy, Adlet thought, *Now I can win.* Once the truth became clear, nobody would try to kill her anymore—aside from the seventh. Adlet had a solid sense that they’d surmounted the greatest obstacle in this fight.

But the moment his tense nerves relaxed, the voice resounding in his mind telling him to let Fremy die grew louder.

“You have to die, Fremy, or all the Braves will die,” said Rolonia.

Adlet’s consciousness receded, even as he fought the pain. Now that the tension in his mind had been relieved so suddenly, he didn’t have the energy to struggle against the voice anymore.

“Are you okay, Adlet?” Fremy wasn’t looking at Rolonia but at him, with concern.

“Run...,” Adlet muttered. This was his final act of resistance. His right arm ignored his will, swinging his sword up to Fremy’s neck. Fremy jumped backward to avoid it at the last moment, but Adlet’s body kept attacking all on its own. Before his sword could pierce her stomach, Fremy kicked him in the head.

“Addy!” cried Rolonia.

Slightly dazed, Adlet staggered. But an instant later, Rolonia’s whip was slashing at Fremy, and she wasn’t just trying to restrain her this time. Fremy jerked herself out of the whip’s path.

I have to protect Fremy. I have to stop Rolonia , Adlet thought, but his body had already submitted to the pleasure of obeying orders. The blade wasn’t going for Rolonia but for Fremy. He was trying to kill the person who, just moments ago, he’d been trying to protect with his life.

Fremy was shocked to see him attacking her. As he did, he pleaded, *Fremy, please, avoid this*. But his body didn’t even hesitate to lash out at her.

Adlet’s sword slid by her.

“...Adlet.”

Fremy was able to dodge for two reasons: Her earlier kick had thrown off his sense of balance, and she’d never let her guard down, not even with Adlet. Blood flowed from her neck, but the wound wasn’t fatal.

“So now you’re being controlled, too,” she said.

“...Ru...n. I...can’t...,” Adlet said. His body was contradicting his words, turning his sword on Fremy of its own accord.

“Don’t worry. I won’t die. You’re not good enough to kill me.”

Why’d you have to say it that way? It was a thought unsuited to the current situation.

Fremy crouched low and broke into a full-speed run to escape the dead-end hallway. But Rolonia stood blocking the exit.

Hans looked a little confused at first, then seemed to decide killing Fremy was the priority. Adlet threw a knife and a poison needle at her, while Rolonia’s

whip danced and Hans sliced at her. Fremy couldn't dodge all their attacks.

And then, right when Adlet's gut was telling him Fremy would die...

"My, my."

Along with the bored-sounding voice, blades sprouted from the ceiling, floor, and walls. One blade skimmed by Hans as he jumped, while another blocked Rolonia's whip. Adlet's poison needle and throwing knife shot between the blades, but Fremy turned aside to avoid them.

"This isn't the situation I heard about at all. Would you mind explaining what is going on here?" Nashetania stood there, panting.

"I'm the one who'd like to ask that question," Fremy replied as she defended herself with the barrel of her gun.

Just a little while earlier, number thirty had been waiting for Nashetania in a corner of the labyrinth.

After going to make sure that her strategy had been a success, Nashetania returned at a trot. "I went to check, and it seems the plan has succeeded. Dozzu saw me and gave me a little nod. Thank you very graciously for your cooperation." She bowed her head. "Now we just have to get rid of Fremy, is that right? Where might she be?"

Number thirty told her where Fremy and the others were and how their fight was going.

"Hmm, it seems the situation doesn't require my assistance, though. I suppose Fremy will die soon, and in the best case scenario, Adlet will blow himself and Mora up as well. Right?"

"...You never know what Adlet might pull off. He's the one Commander Tgurneu was most wary of. We were ordered to take the greatest care with him."

"Yes, I do agree with you there."

"Your presence would break this stalemate. Adlet and Fremy are sure to die now."

In code, number thirty said to the fiend behind it, "<You run this message to

Cómmander Tgurneu. Once we've killed Fremy and done the transfer, leave this place immediately and head for Cómmander Tgurneu's forces.>" Having given that order, number thirty was about to run off.

But Nashetania wasn't following. "Oh, your messenger doesn't need to go. Wait a little longer, please."

"What is this ábout?"

"Well, I do have some business with you. Um, I would like to ask one thing...", Nashetania said, and then she stopped using human speech. What came out of her mouth next was the same code language number thirty had been using. "<What is this transfer you've been talking about?>"

Number thirty, its body camouflaged in the flagstones, wavered just a bit. It was trying to crawl along the ground and make its escape.

But Nashetania instantly brought forth a whole score of blades around it. "I'd like to get some more information from you, but it seems Adlet will be in real danger very soon."

Number thirty dropped its camouflage as the floor, sprouted a spine from its tail, and leaped at Nashetania before the messenger fiend charged her, too.

"It seems it's impossible to get any more information from you."

The two fiends' roars echoed through the labyrinth.

Barely three seconds later, the bodies of number thirty and the messenger fiend that had remained with it were in pieces on the floor.

As Nashetania sliced them apart, she wore a kind smile on her face, and then she spoke to the two fiends lying on the ground. "Thank you for giving me that information. I won't break your cores. I'll leave them there. Let's meet again, in ten or twenty years. I'll thank you again when that time comes," she said, then turned her gaze farther down the hall. "Please don't be anxious about it. By that time, we'll have created a world in which all, human and fiend, can live in peace."

Finished with her remarks, Nashetania was about to run off when she noticed something and stopped. "...Oh my. What's this?"

When Nashetania arrived, Fremy thought she looked like aid sent from the heavens. It was bad enough having Hans and Rolonia attacking her at once, never mind Adlet, too. But Fremy was uneasy about what the princess might actually be after.

“Now then, Fremy,” said Nashetania. “What should I do?”

“First, tell me: Are you going to maintain your alliance with the Braves?” Fremy asked.

“Yes, of course.”

Hans stood up from where a blade had knocked him down, while Rolonia readied her whip. Adlet pointed his sword at Nashetania.

Before she could uncover the truth, Fremy would have to stop this fight. They had to defeat both Adlet and Rolonia and the fiend controlling them. “It would be a bad idea for me to die right now,” said Fremy. “Stop them.”

“Sure. That’s what I came here for.”

There wasn’t the time to ask why Nashetania would protect her, what she’d been up to, or where she’d been. Adlet and Rolonia were attacking again.

“!”

Fremy shot Adlet in his armor. She was using less gunpowder, so it wouldn’t pierce his gear—just throw him backward. Nashetania’s blades repelled Rolonia’s whip, but she refrained from doing anything to hurt Rolonia herself.

“...Fremy...I...was wrong. You have to die...,” said Adlet. But a moment later, he held his head and moaned. “Run...now... Wait...no...kill yourself.” Watching his confusion, Fremy could tell he was still fighting. He was still resisting and trying not to kill her.

“You said this was all Adlet’s plot, didn’t you, Hans? That he was just pretending to try to kill me?” Fremy said to Hans, who was raising his swords. “Does this look like an act to you?”

“Yeah, it does. Yer still alive, ain’t ya? You ain’t got a scratch an’ yer in perfect health.”

No , thought Fremy. Because if she hadn’t changed her mind, if the piece of

that dog whistle hadn't rolled out onto the ground, she would have been dead.

"Yer bein' deceived. Just how the *meow* did he do it? Adlet really is quite the guy." Hans smiled. It was a savage expression, unlike Adlet's, and he shot him a brief, murderous glance. But he seemed to decide that the boy was still unable to attack.

If Hans tried to kill Adlet, Rolonia would probably stop him. She was being controlled, but even now, she was still trying to protect her friend.

"You ain't meanin' to kill yerself no meowr, Fremy?"

"Not now." A few moments earlier, she would have probably hesitated to answer. But now, Fremy's gun aimed at Hans was sure. "Sorry, but I can't trust you anymore. I can't die now."

"Then I've got neow choice but to kill ya."

Nashetania kept Adlet and Rolonia at bay as Fremy fought with Hans. Hans sliced at her as if his wounded leg didn't hinder him one bit. One-on-one, he really had the advantage.

"I'll leave this to you, Nashetania," said Fremy, rolling a tiny bomb along the ground. The blast would slow down Rolonia and Adlet. With the princess protecting her back, Fremy turned away and fled.

Adlet could no longer stop himself from attacking Fremy, but he still continued his desperate struggle. With what little reason he retained, he yelled to his old friend, "Rolonia! Look after Mora!"

That made Rolonia turn around. "O-oh, yeah. I forgot about Lady Mora... Wh-wh-what do I do?" She dithered between chasing Fremy and saving Mora before tossing the unconscious Saint over her back and chasing after Fremy. That would slow her down a bit.

But though Adlet could speak, his own body was now out of his control. He was dodging around Nashetania's blades, chasing after Fremy. *Resist it*, he told himself. He could feel himself inches away from saying a certain something, but with the remnants of his reason, he held it back. If he said that, it was all over. It would make this whole fight come to nothing. All Adlet could do now was to cling to his mind and prevent himself from saying that one thing.

With Nashetania backing her up, Fremy ran. She'd already outrun both Rolonia and Adlet. Rolonia had always been slow, and Adlet was wounded. But Hans was above and beyond either of them.

Fremy rolled bombs along the ground behind her as she dashed through the labyrinth. This would have slowed down a regular enemy, but Hans could run along the walls and ceiling, and it had almost no effect on him.

"You're good, Hans," Nashetania commented casually.

Why am I alive? What am I running for? Fremy asked herself. Just moments ago, she'd been certain she had to die. She was the Black Barrenbloom. Just by being alive, she was bound to destroy the Braves of the Six Flowers.

Fremy shook off the doubts rising in her mind. A fiend was trying to kill her. After she made sure why, she could die. Adlet had told her to stay alive, too. She couldn't betray that request.

"Hold Hans back," said Fremy. "I'll keep going."

"Alone? That won't be easy."

"I just need a little while. I'll use the time to get out of this." Then Fremy turned to Hans. "If you're not the seventh, then don't worry. If I have to die for the Braves's sake, then I will. I'm still prepared to do that."

"Meow , I still can't stop." Hans slipped between Nashetania's blades to continue his pursuit, but Nashetania just barely stopped him with her sword.

"Fremy, there's a fiend hiding at the five-way intersection near the labyrinth entrance. I believe it may be a vital figure to the enemy," Nashetania said, sword ready in her one hand. "You're free to believe that, or not."

Still running, Fremy watched out of the corner of her eye as blades sprouted from the ceiling and walls, one after another, to block Hans's path.

"Lady Mora, please wake up." Rolonia ran through the labyrinth with Mora slung over her shoulder, staunching the flow of blood from the elder Saint's neck while also healing her of the poison in her veins.

With Lady Mora's clairvoyance, we could circle around and get ahead of Fremy. Then, if Hans and Addy catch up to her, we can do a pincer attack. There

was nothing in Rolonia's mind now besides Fremy's death. The urge to kill was the only force driving her.

"Haah...haah..." Adlet was hurrying through the labyrinth, too. Now, his body was nothing more than a puppet that obeyed orders.

But still, he was fiercely resisting. There was still more to do if he wanted to keep Fremy safe.

Fremy raced along, heading for the five-way intersection near the entrance. More than once, she turned down the wrong path. It was difficult to navigate the labyrinth without Mora's directions. It wasn't enough to grit her teeth and stake her life on an option if she wanted to get out. As to whether she would make it or not, she had no choice but to leave her fate up to heaven.

Numbér thirty...whät are you doing?

At the entrance of the labyrinth, by the five-way intersection, number fourteen was near panic. No messenger had come from number thirty, even though it had requested to receive contact as soon as Fremy was dead. No matter how much time passed, number thirty never showed up, and there was no sign of a messenger, either.

Had they failed? It was forced to think so.

So far, number fourteen had only been controlling two of the Braves: Adlet and Rolonia. Number thirty had said that would be enough to kill Fremy—but it wasn't. The two weakest fighters among the Six Braves were not enough when it came to raw force.

They couldn't afford to hold back. Number fourteen made its resolve. It had been fighting at full strength this whole time, but now, it took yet another step. At this much power, its orders would wear off in ten minutes or so, which meant it just had to make sure Fremy was dead before then.

Chamo Rosso. If number fourteen were to take over the strongest of the Braves, Fremy wouldn't stand a chance. Number fourteen would add one more pawn to Adlet and Rolonia. What's more, it would implant the urge to kill in an instant, though even if it destroyed its own life to accomplish this, that still might not be enough.

But number fourteen used its power anyway, emitting the sound wave that summoned the urge to kill for likely the last time.

“Huh?” Chamo muttered quietly. She’d been searching for Nashetania. Hearing some noises in the distance, she was right about to send her slave-fiends off in that direction.

“...What was I doing?” The intelligence vanished from her eyes, and she didn’t even think about the reason for her sudden change of heart.

“The catboy is wrong. Who cares about Nashetania? Chamo’s got to kill Fremy.” Meanwhile, she summoned all her slave-fiends to inform them of a change in their orders. *Find Fremy and kill her.*

Her “pets” dispersed through the labyrinth.

As number fourteen released its sound wave, it was thinking. It should be able to manipulate Chamo with this. Now they could win. They would accomplish the mission given to them by the seventh.

But number fourteen didn’t know that its power was in fact delaying Fremy’s death. It hadn’t even imagined that someone would have figured out its abilities. And it didn’t know that number thirty was already dead.

As number fourteen lay in wait at the five-way intersection, it faintly heard the sound of footsteps, and then saw Fremy dashing up the stairs. In an instant, number fourteen figured everything out. It had been long past too late.

She threw something. Seeing it, number fourteen closed its eyes.

The explosion shook the whole labyrinth. The scores of bombs Fremy had tossed behind her blew apart the ceiling, walls, and floor, and every part of the five-way intersection. The enemy was lying in wait somewhere at the crossroads, hiding via a method that even Mora hadn’t been able to see through. But Fremy hadn’t so much as given a thought to how she might see through its camouflage—since blowing it up would settle the matter.

“...So this is it.” Fremy’s eyes landed on a certain broken rock. Slowly, it changed shape into a fiend, one that resembled massive rhinoceros beetle. It wasn’t familiar to her.

“So it turned itself into a rock. Then, it’s no surprise even Mora couldn’t see it,” Fremy muttered as she looked down at the fiend. She didn’t know if this was the one affecting Adlet and Rolonia, but now, she had no choice but to see how things would turn out.

The ache receded suddenly from Adlet’s head, as if it had never been there. “Agh...ngh...” The abrupt physical change made him dizzy, and he put his hand on the wall for a short rest. The desire to kill Fremy that had been controlling his mind had completely disappeared.

“...So we won.” *The battle’s over, for now*, he thought, but then immediately pulled himself together, realizing that nothing was over yet. Hans was still chasing Fremy, and Adlet still wasn’t able to prove that Tgurneu’s second trap was real.

“Fremy! I’m coming now!” Adlet yelled, dashing off.

That was when he realized—he was completely lost.

“...H-huh?” Rolonia stopped, holding her head. Unable to understand the sudden change within herself, she was confused. When she recalled what she’d been doing, she blanched.

Why hadn’t she realized just how abnormally she’d been acting? Adlet, Fremy, and even Hans had said she was being controlled, but she hadn’t listened to them at all. She’d believed she was in her right mind.

“What is going on here, Rolonia?” asked Mora from where Rolonia was carrying her. She must have regained consciousness at some point. “Are you pursuing Fremy? Have fiends arrived? Why are Hans and Nashetania fighting? Why did Adlet attack me?”

“Huh? Well, um...” Rolonia became flustered and panicked. She didn’t know how to even begin explaining.

“...I understand. You don’t know, either. For now, let’s just put a stop to this fight. Let’s gather everyone together and listen to what they have to say.” As Mora came down from Rolonia’s back to use her power of mountain echo, she asked, “First, Fremy. Why is she still alive?”

Fremy stood alone at the five-way intersection of the labyrinth, smoke rising

around her. There was no sign that Hans or Rolonia was in pursuit, either. No more fiends attacked her.

That was when Mora called out to her with her mountain echo. **“You’re alive, Fremy? I can’t bring myself to be glad you’re safe, however.”** Since Mora had been unconscious, she didn’t know about the second trap Adlet had discovered or the fight that lay ahead.

“The situation has changed, Mora. I can’t die right now,” said Fremy.

“Do you mean to say you’re not the Black Barrenbloom?”

“That’s not what I mean. Just bring everyone here. There’s something I have to show you and explain.”

“You haven’t begun to fear death now, have you?”

“No. We just need to talk about this before we come to a conclusion. We’ll all discuss what happened and what we’re thinking, and if all of you still want me to die then, I’ll do it. We should decide whether I die or not based on that discussion.”

After a long silence, Mora said, **“I’ll contact everyone. Wait there. ”**



Chapter 6

To Believe
in Love



Chapter 6

To Believe in Love

“The seventh is sure to drive Fremy to suicide,” Tgurneu said in the darkness.

It was the thirteenth day since the Evil God’s awakening. Some time had passed since Adlet and his comrades had driven off Nashetania and escaped the Phantasmal Barrier.

Listening to Tgurneu speak was a lizard-fiend with three wings.

“Are you uneasy about the success of my plan? Well, I’m sure you are, since you know all my plans. To you, this one must seem incredibly flawed.”

The three-winged fiend said nothing.

“But this is how I see it: There is no such thing as a perfect gambit. Pursuing such an ideal is pointless. It could be, if it were possible to predict everything your enemy did and move them here and there as you wished. But then that person wouldn’t be an enemy anymore. What makes them your foe is because they don’t do what you want. A meticulously formed plan can easily fall apart due to the unpredictable actions of an enemy, small coincidences, or the stupid failures of your allies.”

“Thàt’s true, but...”

“So then, is it possible to come up with a strategy that will never fail, no matter what your enemy does? No, it’s not. Each tear mended gives rise to the possibility of a new one. With each possible eventuality you prepare for, you risk a new brand of failure. All you do is go around in circles forever. It’s a real bind. So what do you do then?”

The three-winged fiend didn’t reply. It didn’t seem Tgurneu was expecting a reply, either.

“In short, when you come up with a plan, you’re making a bet. No matter how many stratagems you come up with, and no matter how many unexpected situations you prepare for, there will always come a point when you leave your fate up to heaven.

“So I must wager. What should I bet on?”

“ ... ”

“I’ve bet it all on what I believe in: the one certain thing in a world where nothing else is worth one’s trust. It’s the one thing I believe will never betray me, no matter what else may. I’ve staked everything on this, and I believe this is the best strategy.”

The three-winged fiend knew where Tgurneu put its faith.

It recalled the past, and all the plans it had seen as the commander’s body.

Tgurneu had created Fremy, a child born from a human and a fiend, and then it had raised her into a powerful warrior—and betrayed her. It had been necessary to make Fremy into a real Brave of the Six Flowers to make the Black Barrenbloom complete, Tgurneu said. It had explained the situation in detail to the three-winged fiend, who didn’t know much about hieroglyphs and hieroforms.

The Black Barrenbloom was an incredibly powerful hieroform, as well as particularly complex in its mechanisms. A number of conditions had to be fulfilled for something to be viable as the vessel for it.

First of all, the Black Barrenbloom’s vessel had to be a fiend’s body. Tgurneu had done dozens of tests in an attempt to make the Black Barrenbloom out of a human, and it had failed every time. You could turn a human’s body into the Barrenbloom, but it would die under the strain of the transformation. They had only ever succeeded with fiend bodies. What was the reason for this? If Tgurneu knew, it wouldn’t have had to go to all that trouble.

Furthermore, it wasn’t enough just for the Black Barrenbloom to be a fiend. It was only complete when the Crest of the Six Flowers was endowed on that body. As for why—the Black Barrenbloom did not function all on its own. Only by altering the essence of the Crest of the Six Flowers imbued on its body could the Barrenbloom gain the ability to absorb the power of the crests.

One who possessed the body of a fiend and also held the Crest of the Six Flowers: Fremy was the only creature with those qualities.

The Crest of the Six Flowers would only manifest on those who had sworn

deep in their hearts to defeat the Evil God. A fiend, who had sworn loyalty to the Evil God by its very nature, would not get a crest no matter how it struggled. For that reason, Tgurneu had needed Fremy, a creature with the body of a fiend and the heart of a human.

These were all things the commander had told the three-winged fiend.

But Tgurneu had also said this: They couldn't win with the Black Barrenbloom alone.

It was possible the Braves of the Six Flowers wouldn't trust the daughter of a fiend. And Fremy, in her despair, might fight with no sense of self-preservation and get herself killed. So Tgurneu had explained that they absolutely needed someone to protect her.

After telling Mora that she wanted the whole group to gather on that spot, Fremy stood there in silence. What was in her heart was not the gladness of victory, but unease.

She was still the Black Barrenbloom, and she was continuing to absorb the power of the crests even now. It was an unquestionable fact that the mind-controlling fiend had tried to kill her, but that was not enough to decide whether she should live or die.

"Tgurneu came up with a second trap. Fremy's death will cause all the Braves to die," Adlet had insisted.

"All o' this is Adlet's plot. He's makin' it seem as if they're tryin' to kill ya," Hans had concluded.

Which of their statements was true, and which was false? Was one of them the seventh, or was it someone else?

Fremy's fate had not yet been decided.

"...Why're you still alive?" The first one to come out of the labyrinth was Chamo. When she saw Fremy, the slave-fiends behind her readied for a fight, and Fremy raised her gun, too. "Chamo was so relieved when you said you were gonna kill yourself. You're not gonna betray the Braves, are you?"

"The situation has changed."

All the slave-fiends were packed tight in the hallway. Fremy prepared for their full-on, simultaneous attack, manifesting small bombs in her left hand.

“Some fiends were trying to kill me—I don’t know why, though.”

“...Fiends? What’s this about? Chamo doesn’t get it.”

“I thought I told you to stop fighting.” Mora’s mountain echo resounded around Chamo and Fremy.

Then another voice sounded from a different branch of the five-way intersection. “I agree with Mora,” said Dozzu. “Before we fight, I’d like it if you could please debrief me on the situation. We have no idea what is going on here.”

The fiend and Goldof came walking out of the passage.

When Chamo saw Dozzu, she became even more aggressively riled up. “... Hey, dumb mutt. Where’d the princess go? Actually, what did you make her do?”

“I haven’t the slightest clue what she intends to do, or what she may have done.”

“That’s a lie. You were plotting something, weren’t you?”

Goldof also seemed surprised that Fremy was still alive, but he didn’t immediately try to kill her like Chamo—most likely because he didn’t understand what was going on. “I carried out...our bags. I assume...we need them.” Goldof had brought everything they’d left in the room with the Saint of the Single Flower.

How considerate of him, thought Fremy.

“You’re...the Black Barrenbloom...Fremy,” said Goldof. “Or did you find something...that disproves that?”

“No, unfortunately not. In fact, I can say that the situation has gotten even worse,” Fremy replied.

Goldof’s expression turned grim. Chamo was glaring daggers and both Dozzu and Fremy.

“Fremy!”

Another voice called her name, which brought her both comfort and slight unease. Adlet, panting, came running from a different path of the five-way intersection. When he saw Fremy, he breathed a great sigh of relief. “...So you’re okay.”

Fremy couldn’t meet his eyes. He was wounded all over because of her. “I’m sorry.”

“What for? You’re alive. What’re you apologizing for?” Adlet smiled as if nothing could bother him at all, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at his face. She had never understood his feelings. She’d believed he hated her, and that misunderstanding had hurt him.

“Oh, and we’ve got one more to kill, huh? Chamo just keeps getting more and more targets,” Chamo grumbled.

“Adlet...,” said Goldof, “I still...believe...you’re the seventh. And that we should...restrain you.”

“We can’t say that for sure, Goldof,” said Fremy.

“...I don’t...trust you enough...to agree with you.”

Fremy and Adlet moved closer together, and Goldof and Chamo squared off against them.

The situation was right about ready to ignite when finally, Mora and Rolonia arrived. Mora was leaning on Rolonia’s shoulder as the younger Saint dragged her along. It seemed Mora was still somewhat paralyzed.

“You’re going to explain why you attacked me, Adlet.” Mora didn’t immediately move to strike him, but she was still fairly hostile toward him. “I understand that Fremy is important to you, and I can accept that you were trying to protect her. But you went too far.”

Fremy sighed. “We’ve completely lost all trust, haven’t we?”

“...I was prepared for this,” said Adlet.

Finally, they heard the sound of swords clashing from behind Mora and Rolonia. Panting, Nashetania leaped in among the group. She was wounded

here and there, apparently having been locked in combat with Hans the whole time. “Help me, Goldof. Hans is attacking me.”

Not long after Nashetania’s entrance, Hans appeared, pointing his swords at Adlet, Nashetania, and Fremy.

“Wait, Hans,” said Mora. “Before you start fighting, explain what’s happening here.”

“Hrmeow , we can talk after Fremy’s dead.”

Chamo was ready to send her slave-fiends into action in response, while Adlet, Fremy, and Nashetania each raised their weapons. Rolonia dithered, confused.

Then Mora, Dozzu, and Goldof cut in to keep the fight in check. “...I thought I said we would talk,” Mora rebuked them. “Or can you not even have a discussion without first being restrained?”

Hans seemed to realize that if they chose to fight then, they would have been at a disadvantage. Chamo stopped her slave-fiends, too, apparently disappointed.

“That’s fine, Hans. Let’s resolve this with words, not swords.” Adlet smiled.

Hans replied with another smile. *“...Meow. That ain’t a bad idea, either.”*

Sighing, Mora said to the group, “Now then, who will begin?”

Adlet spoke first. He told the others about everything that had happened to him: how Hans had decided he was the seventh and Goldof had agreed with him; how he had acted to protect Fremy; and how Mora had stopped him. This was Fremy’s first time hearing all this, too.

Then Adlet explained his deductions as well: Tgurneu had prepared a second trap, the condition for its activation was Fremy’s death, and the seventh was trying to make sure Fremy died to ensnare them all.

“The proof is that something was manipulating both my and Rolonia’s minds,” said Adlet. “Until just a little while ago, all I could think about was killing Fremy. Now...I’m okay.”

“And I killed that fiend over there. Based on what’s been said, it’s safe to

assume that was the one with mind-controlling abilities.” Fremy took over from Adlet and pointed to the beetle-fiend buried among the rubble of the half-collapsed labyrinth.

“Is it true, Rolonia, that you were being manipulated?” Dozzu asked.

“I-I’m certain I was. Suddenly, I felt like I just had to kill Fremy, and at the time, I didn’t feel any doubts about it at all. But then suddenly, I was wondering what I was doing... I can’t prove it, but it’s true,” Rolonia insisted.

“...Now that you mention it...” Chamo tilted her head. “Chamo just remembered. A little while ago, there was this sudden urge, like killing Fremy was more important than looking for the princess. Like it wasn’t time to be following the catboy’s orders. Chamo didn’t think much of it at the time, but maybe that was mind control,” she ventured.

That seemed to be enough for Mora, Goldof, and Dozzu to acknowledge the mental manipulation as truth. “The enemy intended to kill Fremy...,” Mora murmured. “’Tis sudden. And difficult to believe.”

“Anyway, what about the princess?” asked Chamo.

Smiling, Nashetania replied. “I do apologize for doing these things to arouse such suspicion. But I couldn’t just sit there meekly in these circumstances. I had to find evidence that could help us judge whether Fremy should live or die—and I was the only one who could.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I pretended that I’d betrayed the Six Braves to make contact with an enemy fiend,” Nashetania explained.

After she had run away from Chamo and the others, she’d found the enemy. Mora had told them there were no fiends in the labyrinth, but nevertheless, Nashetania had figured that an enemy would show up and get up to something. Sure enough, she had found one, and she had contacted it with an offer of cooperation. Nashetania told the group about how she had encountered a white lizard-fiend and what abilities it had.

Fremy realized the fiend Nashetania described had once been a part of the family that had pretended to love her. She had been completely unaware of its

shape-shifting and camouflage abilities, though. Both six months ago and a few hours earlier, Fremy had missed her chances to kill it, and she regretted her own softness.

The white lizard-fiend had meant to kill Fremy and requested that Nashetania murder her. What's more, it had been giving the mind-controlling fiend orders. Nashetania also explained that it had ordered her to distract Dozzu and Goldof, since they were uncertain elements. "I found out what the enemy's goal was, and that was why I saved Fremy."

I can't trust what Nashetania says and does so easily, Fremy felt.

"...So, Princess. Do ya think what that fiend said was true?" Hans replied. "Yer the enemy. It wouldn't leak information to ya so easy. It seems to me the fiend lied to you—and that was another one of Adlet's ploys."

"There's no way. They were speaking in code." Nashetania continued, telling them that Dozzu's faction had learned to partially decrypt messages from Tgurneu's faction and that the enemy was definitely not yet aware that their code had been cracked. "Yes...and there was one more thing. They said something curious in those coded conversations."

"What's that?"

"It was the word *transfer*. They said that after killing Fremy, they would carry out the 'transfer,' and only the seventh knew how."

Transfer. They all reacted to the new term. Nashetania relayed the conversation to the group.

"We don't know what this transfer thing is about, based off what you've said. Don't you have any other clues?" Adlet said.

"Please don't ask the impossible. It wasn't possible to gather any more information in that situation."

Fremy considered. They didn't know if what Nashetania was saying was true, and neither did they know if the information she had acquired was real or not. But if it was real, they could make some conjectures. "...The enemy may have been planning to transfer the power of the Black Barrenbloom to something or someone else after I died and continue to absorb the power of the crests. Or

something along those lines.”

“Hold on. Could that happen? Auntie, could it?” Chamo said.

Incredulous, Mora mulled it over a bit. “I wish I could say for certain that it’s impossible, but this situation is already beyond my understanding. The knowledge Tgurneu possessed regarding hieroglyphs and hieroforms far surpasses that of All Heavens Temple.”

“Dozzu, Nashetania,” said Fremy, “tell us what you think.”

Dozzu seemed to have some trouble responding. “It would be extremely difficult—however, I couldn’t say for certain that it’s impossible. But since some of the hieroglyphs of the Black Barrenbloom are concealed from us, I can’t say anything.”

“I’ve been saying all this time that the seventh is trying to get Fremy killed,” said Adlet. “And there’s no longer any doubt that the fiends were trying to kill her, too. We can’t trust what Nashetania said just like that, but if she’s right, then we can’t let them carry out this transfer. Guys, have your say. Do you still think we should kill Fremy?”

“So who are you saying the seventh is, Adlet?” Mora asked him. Adlet’s eyes turned toward one person, as if to say that he didn’t even need to reply.

“...Of course, Adlet. If yer assertion’s right, then I’m the meowst suspicious here.”

Chamo’s eyes went wide, and she looked back and forth between Adlet and Hans. She would never have predicted Hans to be under suspicion, Fremy could tell. For whatever reason, Chamo trusted Hans quite a lot. Or perhaps she had a personal affection for him.

“What are you talking about, Adlet?” asked Chamo.

“Be quiet, Chamo. Listen, Hans. Your actions have been understandable. It was natural for you to suspect me and try to kill Fremy, given the situation. And there’s the chance that you were just mistaken about the glowing words, too. But you were too impatient and too stubborn, as if you’d made up your mind from the start to do something. That’s why I’m forced to suspect you as the seventh. Do you have anything to say?”

Hans sighed, scratching his head, and said, “My opinion ain’t changed. Yer doin’ what Tgurneu wants. I don’t know if it’s controllin’ ya with that power Dozzu talked about or if yer doin’ it of yer own free will. But yer tryin’ to protect Fremy and kill us all. Ya lied about the message, and ya took Mora hostage to stop Fremy killin’ herself. The enemy controllin’ Rolonia and Chamo and feedin’ the princess fake informeowtion was all part of yer plan to keep ’er alive.”

Fremy surveyed the other members of the group as they listened to Hans. Mora, who’d been unconscious, and Goldof and Dozzu, who’d been unaware of the whole situation, appeared unable reach an answer. But Chamo was clearly on Hans’s side. On the other hand, Rolonia and Nashetania had accepted Adlet’s claim. Fremy herself still couldn’t reach a decision. Which story was true?

“You’ve got to explain one thing, Adlet,” said Hans. “You didn’t see no words. I’m not the only one who confirmed that. Mora did, too. That was a lie ya came up with on the spot.

“So suppose yer not the seventh. There’s still one thing you’ve done that’s clearly outta place. You’ve been using this glowin’ message you’ve never seen as proof to insist there’s a second trap. Why’d ya lie about it? How could ya realize there was a second trap when you ain’t seen nothin’? If yer goin’ to insist, you’ve got to explain.”

Fremy stared at Adlet. He had clearly lost his composure. She could tell he had nothing to say in reply to Hans’s assertion.

It was the thirteenth day since the Evil God’s awakening, and in the darkness, two fiends were having a discussion.

“If you could just cóntrol the Braves with your power, Cómmander Tgurneu, then this wouldn’t have been such a strüggel,” said the three-winged fiend. It knew something that Tgurneu kept an absolute secret from all other fiends. The only ones who knew about this secret ability were the three-winged fiend and specialist number two. Number fourteen might have gotten an inkling of it, but it couldn’t talk about it.

Tgurneu had the ability to put humans under its command and control them.

Once, it had used this power to control the Saint of the Single Flower, who

had sealed herself away, to take possession of her. Then it had stolen the seventh crest, absorbed the power of the Spirit of Fate, and arranged for the humans under its command to create the Black Barrenbloom.

“Come now,” said Tgurneu, “that’s not a very nice thing to say. My ability is strong, but it’s not as if I’m all-powerful.”

This skill had many flaws. The target had to fulfill certain conditions, or Tgurneu couldn’t control them. What’s more, it took nearly a month to gain complete control. The technique had worked on the Saint of the Single Flower, since she had met those conditions, but it would be useless against the Braves. If Tgurneu only started once the Evil God awoke, the battle would be over before the effects of the ability manifested.

After stealing the seventh crest from the Saint of the Single Flower, Tgurneu had given it to a fitting individual whom it had made sure to control beforehand, then slipped the target in among the rest as a fake Brave. It had been a risky plan, but it had been the only option available. Tgurneu had required someone both vulnerable to its ability and capable of protecting Fremy. It had chosen, reared, and entrusted the entirety of its plot to the one worthy of its trust.

Fremy was surprised to see who stepped in to counter Hans’s argument.

“Are you certain that Adlet didn’t see anything?” Nashetania said, pulling a gem out of her armor. It was a large ruby, but it had been chipped off in a number of places. “I found this inside the stomach of the white lizard-fiend I just killed. It’s broken, and it doesn’t work anymore. But it seems clear it’s a light gem.”

Hans seemed a little startled to see Nashetania suddenly bring out a gem, but his calm demeanor didn’t falter one iota.

“...Show it to me,” Mora said, taking the gem in her hand to examine it. After some consideration, she said quietly, “There are hieroglyphs carved on the inside. It’s broken, so I can’t see what, but...it’s clear that it possesses some other function besides simply glowing.”

As Adlet looked at the gem, he seemed to be deliberating.

“I wonder why that white lizard-fiend swallowed this gem? Perhaps this is what projected the glowing message Adlet was talking about,” said Nashetania.

Even Fremy, who was now uncertain as to whether Adlet was the seventh or not, had not believed the glowing message really existed. Given how he was acting when Hans had cross-examined him, it had seemed clear he was making it up. “It couldn’t be, Adlet... That wasn’t a lie?” asked Fremy.

Adlet answered, “Ouch. I told you it was true. Even *you* thought I was lying?”

Adlet knew the story about the glowing message was completely false, and that Hans hadn’t seen anything, either. But he had also known the light gem would be found in the stomach of the white lizard-fiend.

Adlet desperately continued his act, as if he had never in his wildest dreams imagined Nashetania would bring this gem to them.

Is my core...safe? Number thirty wondered as it observed its own body lying on the floor of the labyrinth, sliced up by Nashetania. As long as its core was intact, it could generate a new body and revive.

By the time it was revived again, would the humans be gone? Would the world belong to the Evil God? As its consciousness faded, number thirty prayed for Tgurneu’s victory.

Once it was revived, would it be praised as a Brave-killing hero, or would it be branded a great war criminal and the reason for their loss? Well, it wouldn’t know until it woke up.

Right before its consciousness went dim, number thirty reflected on the battle thus far.

The fiend had been using its excellent hearing to listen in on the Braves as they deciphered the hieroglyphs and discussed the Black Barrenbloom. It hadn’t known anything about the Saint of the Single Flower or Tgurneu’s weapon before then. Of course, it hadn’t known that the Barrenbloom was Fremy, either.

Number thirty was shocked. The young fiend it had been raising was in fact the ultimate weapon for the annihilation of the Braves. *What an incredible mission to be given from Commander Tgurneu to a minor fiend such as myself ,*

it thought.

Still, many unknowns remained to number thirty. How come Tgurneu hadn't ordered them to protect Fremy? Most importantly, what should they do now?

Hans and Chamo were both insisting that they had to kill Fremy. Number thirty listened silently.

Perhaps it should have number fourteen direct urges to kill toward the Braves in such a way that their focus shifted away from Fremy. But Tgurneu's plot could be to implicate Fremy as the Black Barrenbloom in order to have her killed. If so, such an order would be a foolish action on number thirty's part; it would ruin its master's plan. *Don't do anything that hasn't been ordered to you* was the rule that all fiends under Tgurneu's command followed. Tgurneu loathed uncertain elements slipping into its plans. Until orders came, number thirty would lay in wait and observe. That was the correct choice, as Tgurneu's subordinate.

But then number thirty wondered why there was this pain in its chest. It was a young fiend, less than two hundred years old, and it had not experienced the past battles with the Braves of the Six Flowers. It knew the howling and despair of the Evil God's defeat only through imagination and hearsay. But it believed this pain had to be something similar.

Number thirty had also heard the conversation in which Adlet had claimed he'd seen a glowing message and Hans had revealed that was a lie. It had heard what Adlet had done in the storehouse for fiend corpses, too. Based on this information, it sensed Adlet was lying.

The boy's actions were inexplicable. Why would he be protecting Fremy in this situation? Though number thirty had questions, there was no way it could understand what Adlet was thinking.

That was when number thirty's thoughts turned to Fremy.

Just a little while earlier, she had seen the white lizard-fiend and let it get away. Her former family member inferred that Fremy still had some feelings toward it. In that moment, the girl had seemed deserving of pity to number thirty.

Pity. It was fundamentally not something fiends ever felt. But some did come to gain individual will and emotion. Number thirty had heard that such incidents had been mysteriously on the rise for the past few years. It seemed the white lizard-fiend had become another one of these: the result of a misdirected evolution.

“What do we do, numbér thirty? I’m rélying on your orders.”

There was no way number thirty could tell this to number fourteen beside it. Those under Tgurneu’s command that were found to have developed their own will were doomed to immediate death.

The drive that had awoken within number thirty was pity for an unfortunate creature. It recalled all the many things it had said and done to Fremy. It had discovered the tragedy of a creature who existed only to be used by Tgurneu. She had served Tgurneu with the greatest loyalty. She, of all fiends, had withstood the greatest hardships for the commander’s sake. Number fourteen couldn’t allow her to have entirely no recompense for all that.

It wanted Fremy to live, and it wanted to tell her everything and apologize. And it wanted to invite her to return to the fiends.

The whereabouts of number six, who had loved her, were unfortunately unknown. But there had to be some among the countless fiends out there who would join with her. If they searched around the Howling Vilelands, she could probably see her beloved dog again, too. She had a home to return to.

If Fremy returned there to contribute to the overthrow of the Braves of the Six Flowers, then even Tgurneu couldn’t reject her. Tgurneu had to accept her this time. Perhaps it had been of such a mind for a long time and had only suppressed those feelings.

Would protecting Fremy mean going against Tgurneu’s will? Well, number thirty hadn’t received orders *not* to do so. It could take that as permission to make independent judgments, and thus it made up its mind to act of its own accord and decide on its own. If that choice ran counter to Tgurneu’s will, then that just meant number thirty would be executed.

There was a seventh among the Braves. Number thirty didn’t know who it was, and it was forbidden to come into contact with that person, too. All it

knew was that the seventh would be acting in accordance with Tgurneu's wishes.

The seventh was clearly not Fremy, since after such a brutal betrayal, she would never obey Tgurneu again.

Adlet Mayer. He's the seventh, isn't he? thought number thirty. Because there was no way a real Brave would lie to his allies at a critical time like this.

As Adlet looked at the light gem in Mora's hand, he reflected on recent events.

Hans had determined he was the seventh, and after that, with Mora's help, he had just barely escaped with his life. Adlet had never felt more despair. Even stopping Chamo and paralyzing Fremy again changed nothing about the situation.

Would the others trust his word? More importantly, would Fremy believe he wasn't the seventh? Adlet was certain they wouldn't. He was never going to earn Fremy's trust with words, and he hadn't been able to talk her out of killing herself. But he also hadn't known what he could do to stop her.

Is it all over? Adlet wondered. But just a few scant moments after that thought had crossed his mind, he'd seen a light of hope.

As he ran, he'd sensed some kind of presence. He'd stopped, just for an instant, and had seen words emerge from the stone flooring.

Give me instructions. You have two allies in this labyrinth.

The message had disappeared in an instant, and Adlet had pretended not to see it as he passed by. Still running, he'd thought about what that message meant.

There were still fiends who had evaded Mora's detection within the labyrinth. They were requesting instructions from him. *Did they attempt contact because they know one of us is the seventh? Or was it a mistake that I saw that, so they panicked and erased the message?*

No, Adlet thought. He'd recalled what Dozzu had said: *The fiends of Tgurneu's faction don't know who the seventh is.* They had mistaken Adlet for the seventh.

It would have been simple to tell Mora about the message on the ground and kill the fiend that put it there. But Adlet didn't—because he had believed this could be the trump card that would help him keep Fremy safe and get out of this situation.

“Mora, is this the path I should be headed down?” Adlet had asked.

“Wait just a moment. I'm making sure right now... Yes, that's correct.”

From her answer, Adlet had inferred that Mora hadn't seen the message a moment ago. She hadn't been looking around his vicinity. Besides, if she'd seen it, she would have reacted somehow. Maybe he could use these fiends.

He'd felt no hesitation. He would do anything to win. That was his personal conviction.

Number thirty was sure that Adlet had seen the words on its back but pretended not to notice while he continued on. In that moment, the fiend became certain that Adlet was the seventh.

Deceived by Mora, Adlet had been cornered in a dead end of the labyrinth. With no other options available, Adlet had surprised her, knocked her out, and taken her hostage. It had been the only way. If he threatened Mora's life, then Fremy would be forced to stop trying to kill herself, even if just for a little while.

But Adlet had known he couldn't keep her safe forever like that. His last hope had been to trick the fiends that believed he was the seventh.

There was the possibility that the message he'd seen moments before had been the enemy's trap. But he couldn't find another option. He'd knocked out Mora not to take her hostage, but to disable her power of clairvoyance. It would have gotten in his way.

“...You're here,” Adlet had said. He hadn't waited long. No sooner was the floor swaying than it had taken the shape of a white lizard-fiend. Adlet had recalled seeing it before.

“I'll give the orders, so you be quiet and listen.” Adlet had deliberately chosen an arrogant tone, figuring it was best if he wanted to play a convincing traitor.

“Wait. Are you really the seventh?” the white lizard-fiend had said.

That had told Adlet what was going on in its head. It had never known which was the seventh. It had just guessed that Adlet was the one and so had attempted contact. It could have been an act on the fiend's part, but Adlet had ignored that possibility. He had been so desperate, he'd simply thought, *What will be, will be.*

"...You can't be thinking I have any proof that I'm the seventh. What would I do if the Braves were to discover it?" Adlet had retorted. "Even if there was some password to prove who I am, do you think I would tell it to a fiend of *your* station?"

The white lizard-fiend had fallen silent, much to Adlet's relief. If there really had been a password or proof, his lie would have been exposed.

Mora had been unconscious then, so the others were lost without a guide around the labyrinth. The chances that Adlet would have been discovered speaking with the fiend were low. But even so, if anyone had caught him like that, he wouldn't have been able to talk his way out of it. It had sent his anxiety through the roof.

"If you are the seventh, then answer me this: Does Cómmander Tgurneu wish for Fremy to die or survive?"

It doesn't even know that? Adlet had wondered in confusion. He had figured that if Tgurneu actually wanted Fremy dead, then he would discover that and protect Fremy. It had been possible this fiend was pretending not to know, but it would have been odd for a subordinate of this level to attempt to deceive him.

Internally, Adlet had gloated. Tgurneu's doctrine of secrecy must have come to bite it in the ass. Since it never told its mooks what was actually going on, individual fiends couldn't make their own judgments. *I can work with this.* He was certain. "Tgurneu wants Fremy alive, but this situation is unexpected. You're all going to have to work for me, too."

"Understood," number thirty had replied immediately.

But how would Adlet use the fiend? That was the question. Adlet's brain had whirled more fervently than it ever had before. "Tell me your abilities," he'd ordered first. The fiend then told him about its camouflage and hearing abilities.

That could come in really handy , Adlet had decided. “Go find me a light stone from somewhere in the labyrinth. But not just any light stone—it can’t be a topaz...a yellow one. And it can’t be one that just glows. It must have some other unique power in it. That’s all. Can you find one?”

“...When I was guarding the temple, I heard of light gems positioned near the ventilation ducts of the temple that emit light whenever someone draws near so as to alert us when an invader approaches.”

Adlet had been ready to dance at the luck that had fallen into his lap. He hadn’t known for sure if he could use that to fool Mora and the others completely, but he could sway them to believe that the glowing message might not have been a lie.

“Find one of those, break it, and keep it with you. Then find a way to reveal to the Braves or Dozzu’s faction that you were hiding it.”

“...How?”

“You can’t think of a way? Just swallow the broken gem and get yourself killed by one of us. You either have to spit it up the instant you die, or be killed in such a way that it gets tossed out of your stomach.” Adlet had issued orders ruthlessly and decisively, since it seemed like the appropriate attitude for Tgurneu’s subordinate to have.

“You can’t mean to say that alone will keep Fremy safe?”

“Of course not. I still have other tricks up my sleeve.” Adlet had deliberated a little more. Time was running out; the others were coming. He had to do something, and fast. “...Use Dozzu and Nashetania. Approach them with an offer of cooperation and leak information to them.”

“What information?”

Adlet had pondered over this. What lie could deceive Dozzu and Nashetania, as well as Mora, Fremy, and the others? “...Make them think that even if the Black Barrenbloom is killed, the potential to absorb the power of the crests will be transferred to something else. Also, that the seventh is attempting to carry that out. The information you reveal to Dozzu and Nashetania doesn’t need to be concrete. Just give them bits and pieces, like the words *transfer* or *power*

inheritance or something like that. Just make them think that it'd be dangerous to kill Fremy.”

“...That won't work. Dozzu's faction would never believe what we say.”

Yes—Adlet had needed more. He'd racked his brain for an idea.

Before their group had arrived at the temple, Adlet had fallen for an enemy trap and been ambushed. Dozzu had saved him then. And the fiend giving the others instructions for the trap had been this same white lizard-fiend.

Something had felt off about that to Adlet at the time—Dozzu had made a beeline straight for him. He hadn't paid it much mind then, but thinking back on it made him realize that was unnatural. Dozzu and Nashetania must have known what the white lizard-fiend would do.

“Dozzu's faction has probably deciphered the code you're all using,” Adlet had said. He'd had no proof, but it had still been worth betting on. “Give orders to another fiend in code. Something like *We've decided to transfer the Black Barrenbloom, so begin preparations*. Make it seem like you're talking about an absolute secret that you can't let them know about.

“I think Dozzu and Nashetania believe Tgurneu's forces are unaware their code has been deciphered. This will make them believe that they've gotten ahold of an important secret that you're trying to hide.”

The white lizard-fiend had seemed uneasy. Adlet had been, too, for that matter. The whole plan had been based on guesses. His chances of success had been low, but he'd had no choice but to go for it.

“Since we don't know what Dozzu and Nashetania will do, I can't give you precise orders. You make your own judgments to carry out the mission. I leave that all to you. Don't worry—even if you fail, I won't put it on your shoulders.” Was that manner of speaking unlike a subordinate of Tgurneu? Adlet had somewhat regretted that claim.

“Understood. Is that all?”

Adlet hadn't replied at first. The white lizard-fiend was then ready to leave.

“There's more.” Adlet had stopped it from going. The following had been the

most important of his orders, and the first thing he'd thought of. But he hadn't had the courage to say it out loud.

He'd understood that the two instructions he'd just given, on their own, were not enough to keep Fremy safe. But Adlet had also understood that this order would be hellish for him.

"...For you, and the other fiend—this is your most important mission. If needed, use the other survivors for this, too." Hesitantly, Adlet had added, "Do everything in your power to kill Fremy."

The white lizard-fiend had gone silent.

"Use everything at your disposal. Wield every ability you have. Don't hold back in the slightest—not toward Fremy, or toward me when I oppose you. You're not allowed to worry at all that you might kill her."

The white lizard-fiend had seemed afraid. Killing the focal point of Tgurneu's plan must have been unthinkable.

"You need to do it. I have to make the Braves believe that you sincerely tried to kill Fremy, but I ruined your plans. If they figure you were just pretending, then they'll kill her without hesitation—and more importantly, Fremy will kill herself." Adlet had continued. "Go after her with everything you have. And think about the reason I said that. If you hold back, they're sure to figure out our plan."

"But thén Fremy will die."

"I'll protect her," Adlet had flatly retorted. "No matter how you come at us, no matter what the Braves do, I'm going to keep Fremy safe. I'll defend her from your attacks and stop anything that tries to kill her. That's what I have to do to keep her safe."

Behind that declaration, Adlet's heart had been trembling in fear. Hans and Chamo would likely try to kill both him and Fremy, and Fremy would try to kill herself, too. Then adding an attack from the fiends on top of that...

Adlet hadn't come up with a plan for how he would keep her safe. But he would be forced to dive into that hell himself.

“...Understood. I will use the other fiend, specialist number fourteen. It—”

“You don’t have to tell me its abilities. Actually, don’t tell me, no matter what.” If Adlet had known what kind of attack was coming, he would probably have reacted in an unnatural way. He wouldn’t have been able to cover that up, no matter how careful he was. And if he’d made the others suspect even slightly that he had ordered fiends to fake an attempt on Fremy’s life, then he wouldn’t be able to save her.

“Number fourteen’s powers are trémendous. If they are used in earnëst, Fremy will certainly die. And prótecting her would still be extremely difficült, even without that.”

“Did I say you could talk back?” Adlet had silenced the fiend’s dissent as he stifled his own fear. He’d encouraged himself: *I’m the strongest man in the world. I’d never fail to protect Fremy.*

“And one more thing. No matter what means of contact you use, avoid Hans at all costs. We have to make it seem like he’s the seventh. That’s the finishing touch on the plan to save Fremy. If you mess up and provide Hans with any information, it could cause the whole plan to fall apart.”

“...Understood.”

Does this fiend really believe I’m the seventh? Adlet had wondered. *Will it really do as I say?*

Adlet’s directions had confused number thirty.

But this boy was the seventh. He’d received his orders directly from the top. He ranked far above number thirty, so it had to obey.

At first, number thirty had doubted if Adlet really was the seventh. He was too ignorant about the internal affairs of Tgurneu’s forces and had no proof that he was the seventh, either. But now, number thirty believed there was no way it could be anyone else.

Adlet did not concern himself with his allies’ lives. Number thirty got no sense at all from his orders and the way he talked that he was trying to protect anyone besides Fremy. He clearly didn’t mind if his other allies died, as long as Fremy was safe.

Adlet had to be the seventh. Number thirty would trust in him, and in the strength of the one Tgurneu had chosen.

The fiend considered the situation. If they wanted to do their very best to kill Fremy, then how should it order number fourteen? Controlling Hans or Nashetania would hinder the plan. So then, the one to control should be Adlet in front of it. If they were going to make an earnest attempt on Fremy's life, they should control him first. He might kill Fremy. That was extremely likely, in fact. But number thirty prayed that outcome would be avoided.

If they went for one more puppet, then perhaps it should be Chamo. But if they controlled both Adlet and Chamo, number thirty doubted Adlet could protect Fremy, no matter how he struggled. So then, Rolonia? Goldof? Number thirty would have to judge based on how things went.

"...And one last thing," said Adlet. "Attack me now. This isn't that important, but just in case."

"Understood."

"I'll fight back, but don't worry. I won't be serious."

The spine sprouted from the end of number thirty's tail, and it attacked Adlet.

"Have you seen this gem before, Adlet?" asked Nashetania.

Adlet looked at the broken gem from the white lizard's stomach and said, "I don't know... If I'd seen it, I'd remember. There was nothing like that in the body storehouse when I searched it."

"So Adlet really did see a message, and then the white lizard-fiend found and swallowed the light gem that projected it after Adlet left. That was why I couldn't find anything, either. If you consider that, it all comes together," said Mora.

As Adlet listened, he was thinking, *You've done well, white lizard-fiend. Thanks to you, I can keep Fremy safe. You did a perfect job.*

His unexpected ally had probably not been acting under orders, but had decided of its own free will to protect Fremy—Adlet had been able to tell that much. She was not a monster, loved by no one. There had actually been a fiend

out there thinking of her, and that made Adlet glad—even if he couldn't tell Fremy about it now.

“Hans, did you really not see that message? You didn't carry away the light gem after Adlet left, did you?” Nashetania asked Hans. Fremy and Rolonia were eyeing him with suspicion.

Hans had to be surprised. Up until this point, he must have believed he wouldn't have to give any orders to the fiends, and they would just try to kill Fremy themselves. That was why he'd just let them be, never attempting to contact them.

And now an object that could disprove his assertions had been found in one of those fiend's stomachs. He had to be wondering if the fiends had betrayed him. He'd probably avoided ever contacting them so as to prevent his identity from being discovered. And that had brought about his defeat.

There was still a chance that Hans wasn't the seventh, but Adlet was no longer even considering it. They had to kill him. Or at the very least, they had to rob him of the ability to fight. As for why: He was trying to kill Fremy. Adlet couldn't condone anyone who would hurt her, even if he were a real Brave.

“I don't recall ever seein' a gem like that. Adlet had a fiend carry it around so he could claim I'm lyin'.” Hans's calm smile didn't falter, but his arguments were weakening. “There's still somethin' funny here, Adlet. When that fiend was controllin' Rolonia, how did ya hold on to yer mind for so long? Mew were just pretendin' to be controlled. You were actin' since ya thought it'd be unnatural for ya to remain in yer right mind.”

He's still going to argue? Adlet didn't know himself why he'd been able to resist the mind control. Perhaps some people were affected more than others. “You're wrong. I was fighting. There was a voice yelling in my head to kill Fremy, and I was fighting like hell to resist it. In the end, I couldn't fight it anymore, and I nearly hurt her,” Adlet shot back.

Fremy added, “He really was being controlled. He was serious when he attacked me. His eyes told me he'd lost his will. It wasn't the sort of thing you could fake.” Then she addressed the whole group. “Being in that fight, I could tell—that fiend was not just pretending to try to kill me. I could have died at any

point then. It was simple coincidence that led me to decide that I would stay alive. It really was trying to take me out, and I can say that for certain.”

Hans was at a loss for words for a little while, and then suddenly, he started laughing. “*Meow. Meow...meow! Meow-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!*”

Adlet tensed, thinking Hans might suddenly swing his blade at him.

“Adlet, mew might actually be the strongest man in the world. That’s darn amazin’. Oh, frankly... I’ve got to say, I underestimated ya.”

Adlet was sure he had Hans cornered. But the laughter didn’t sound like a bluff or despair. He really was glad.

“You ordered them to seriously try to snuff Fremy so that you could protect her, right when yer backed all the way to the wall? Yer without a doubt the only idiot in the whole world who could make a decision like that.”

So he’s figured it out? Adlet had known Hans would see through him, for sure. But at this point, Hans would be powerless to do anything about it.

“That claim sounds forced, Hans,” said Mora, “and very clearly impossible. From what we’ve all heard here, Fremy could have died at any point, isn’t that right? Adlet wouldn’t have allowed her to die as a part of a plan to protect her.”

“What could Adlet have been planning to do without my assistance? There was no guarantee that I was even on the Braves’s side to start with,” Nashetania followed up.

“Hans, you must have realized this,” said Fremy. “When Rolonia’s mind was taken over, Adlet’s situation became desperate. I doubt the fiends would have continued a false attempt to kill me under such circumstances.”

Already, fewer were believing Hans’s assertions. Most of all, Fremy had come to believe that she couldn’t allow herself to die yet.

“...I might just end up gettin’ killed, neow,” Hans cackled. “My hunch was neow lie, after all—I’ve got to kill ya, or I’ll be the one to die. But this is just the sort o’ thing that makes a fight interestin’.” Hans was enjoying his predicament. There really was something wrong with the man.

“Hans,” said Nashetania, “There is no proof you’re the seventh, but given the

situation, we're forced to suspect you and judge that it would be dangerous to accept your suggestions."

"Do you trust Adlet, Nashetania?" asked Dozzu.

"I've decided I will. Do you trust my judgment, Dozzu?" Nashetania replied with conviction.

Dozzu considered for a while and said, "Understood. Then I'll place my bets on your decision. We'll trust Adlet. And at the very least, we can't kill Fremy until we find some new evidence."

"Then what should we do? As we speak, the Black Barrenbloom continues to absorb the power of our crests," said Mora.

Adlet shouted back, "Isn't it obvious? The only way to stop the Barrenbloom is to kill Tgurneu. All of us are going to go take that fiend down right now—before our crests get totally knocked out."

The group's response was silence. They were hesitating. Who to believe: Adlet or Hans? And was it even possible to beat Tgurneu?

"I trust Addy. There's no way he could be the seventh. I don't know if Hans really is the seventh...but right now, I can't trust him," said Rolonia.

"Not like Chamo didn't already know, but you're all dummies. Auntie, Rolonia, Princess—you're all hopeless idiots. We can't trust Adlet! He's obviously the enemy! And Chamo's gonna kill anyone who suspects the catboy!" Chamo was about to send her slave-fiends into action when Hans grabbed her shoulder to prevent her.

"Wait. If we start killin' one another neow, we'll all die."

"But...!"

"...There's another way," Hans said with a glare at Adlet. That one line was enough to stop Chamo.

"It looks...to me...as if the princess...and Adlet...are working together...to trap Hans...and try to trick us," said Goldof, pointing his spear at Fremy. Rolonia raised her whip, while Adlet blocked Goldof's way with his wounded body.

"Even though you've said you'd fight to protect me, you don't trust me at all,

do you?” Nashetania sighed.

With the situation ready to explode at any moment, Mora cut between the two groups of the divided Braves. “Goldof, Chamo, stop it. Haven’t you been listening? Look at the facts. The enemy was trying to kill Fremy, and Adlet was working to prevent that. That’s all it is.”

“...Even if it meant...taking an ally...as hostage?” said Goldof.

Mora countered him but seemed to struggle to say it. “...I’ve nearly killed an ally, myself. That’s no basis for deciding he’s our enemy.”

This is bad, thought Adlet. He was only halfway through his fight to protect Fremy. Next, they had to stop the Black Barrenbloom and its creator, and they wouldn’t be able to stand up to Tgurneu with the Braves at one another’s throats.

“I have further ill tidings,” said Mora. “A number of aerial fiends are approaching this mountain. The forces under Tgurneu’s command are drawing closer.”

Yet another shot of tension ran through the group. They couldn’t fight it like this. Adlet was injured, and the others weren’t unharmed, either. Most of all, they had no plan at all for defeating Tgurneu.

“Hans,” said Adlet, “we’ll settle this discussion later. We have to run now.” He grabbed his iron box and dashed off, out of the labyrinth. The others seemed to decide that was their only option, too. They all headed out of the temple carrying their bags. Once they were outside, they found it was already deep into the night. Fortunately, they still couldn’t see any signs of the enemy.

Following Mora’s directions, they were right about to sprint down the mountain when Hans whirled around to take a slice at Fremy.

“I thought this would happen,” said Fremy as she repelled the carefully aimed strike with the grip of her gun.

Adlet threw a poison needle at Hans, but Hans rolled to avoid it. It was a sloppy ambush, and unlike him.

“Now is not the time, Hans. We have to run now,” said Dozzu.

“No. If we go neow, we’ll fall into Adlet’s trap,” Hans replied, facing Fremy with raised swords.

“Give it up,” said Fremy. “I can’t allow myself to be killed.”

“Neow. If I can’t convince ya, then I’ve got no choice but to kill ya. Maybe once yer dead, we’ll find out there’s no such thing as a transfer.”

Mora looked to Adlet for his opinion.

“...Restrain Hans,” said Adlet. “Don’t kill him now.”

Just as he said that, Nashetania’s blades and Dozzu’s lightning went for Hans. But the assassin used trees and rocks as his shields, dodging each attack before he turned his back to the group and ran.

“Hans! Wait!” cried Mora.

Adlet very much wanted to chase after him, but Tgurneu was the bigger problem right then. They had to run, or they’d be surrounded.

“Chamo! Goldof! Come with me!” Hans yelled as he ran.

“...Okay. Chamo trusts catboy.” Chamo ran off after Hans. Adlet wasn’t able to stop her. She wouldn’t believe him anyway, no matter what he said.

“What will you do, Goldof?” Nashetania asked her retainer. “I’ve decided to trust Adlet, and I’ll fight Tgurneu together with him. Will you go with Hans?”

“I can’t...trust...Adlet. But I can’t...expose you...to danger...either.”

“Then fight together with me. It’s all right. As long as you’re with me, we’ll have the strength of a thousand.” Nashetania smiled, running after Adlet.

It was a relief that Goldof was staying with them, but it hurt to lose Chamo. They would now be forced to challenge Tgurneu without their most powerful fighter.

Fremy lent Adlet her shoulder as they raced down the slope. “Fremy,” he said.

“...We don’t have the time to talk,” she replied, curt as ever.

We’ve gone back to square one again , thought Adlet. He shrugged and said just one thing.

“Let’s survive this.”

Fremy still didn’t know what the truth was. Was Hans really the seventh? Adlet could simply have been mistaken about that.

Was it really best for her to live after all? Maybe she was falling for another of Tgurneu’s schemes. Everything was still uncertain, and the truth was still distant.

“I will say this. I can’t consider anything without killing Tgurneu and completing my revenge. There is no point in my living if I fail to fulfill that, and that fact will never change.”

“Yeah,” said Adlet. “I understand that.”

“And you still want to try to make me happy?” Fremy turned to look at the boy beside her as they ran.

Adlet was puzzled by her question. “Of course.”

Seeing his face, Fremy was again certain of his feelings for her. There was no deception or reservation in his expression. He was trying to beat Tgurneu and the Evil God not for his own sake, but for hers. She shook the last remaining doubts from her mind. There was no way he could be the seventh. He could never be acting on Tgurneu’s orders.

“I hated you,” Fremy said. “When I’m with you, I want to live. That was why. I always wanted to die, but you made me hesitant about it.”

“Do you still hate me?” Adlet ventured.

Fremy hesitated a moment before replying. “...I don’t think so, not now. Being with you makes me want to live, but maybe that’s okay.” Her eyes fixed forward, she couldn’t see the look on his face. But she was sure he had to be grinning.

A fiend lay dying in a corner of the labyrinth. It was specialist number fourteen, its body blown to pieces by Fremy. It had just barely survived her explosive blast. It was close to the end as it listened to the faint sounds of the Braves’s conversation.

Number fourteen still wondered about one thing. Why hadn’t its power

worked on Adlet? Had its effects just been abnormally weak on him, compared with Rolonia and Chamo?

It couldn't be, thought number fourteen. *Another fiend has already...*

It didn't have the time to confirm whether its guess was right before it quietly breathed its last.

It was the dawn of the thirteenth day since the Evil God's awakening. In their small underground room, Tgurneu and the three-winged fiend were still talking.

"Hmm. What's to be done? You're still uneasy, no matter how I explain it?" said Tgurneu.

The three-winged fiend nodded. "...I beg your pardon, but I can't help but think about it. I have no objections as to your choice of who to send in as the seventh. But..."

"Betting the whole grand scheme on the belief that the seventh will keep Fremy safe—is that what troubles you?"

There was no way the three-winged fiend *couldn't* be troubled. If Fremy were to die, then the power of the Black Barrenbloom would vanish completely. Tgurneu's plans could collapse easily, depending on the choices of the Braves of the Six Flowers, or with one single decision from Fremy herself.

The three-winged fiend had once asked Tgurneu if it had ever tried to lay a backup scheme, just in case Fremy died. And Tgurneu had indeed looked for a method to kill the Braves with the power of the Black Barrenbloom, even in the event of Fremy's death. It had tried to add in a function that would kill any Braves nearby the moment she died, as well as a function to transfer the power of the Barrenbloom to something else. Tgurneu had said that this hieroform was already so complex and high-level, it had been impossible to add any more functions.

Tgurneu had added only one extra function that would activate in the Barrenbloom after her death. But it was a very trivial one that would tell Tgurneu how Fremy had died. It said this function had been added purely for its own enjoyment, since it was so obsessed with her death.

Furthermore, if Fremy died, it would completely negate the point of having a

seventh. All Tgurneu's plans would come to nothing, and it would lose all options but to fight the Braves of the Six Flowers with brute force.

If the seventh were to die, and the Braves saw that no petal disappeared from their crests, there would no longer be any risk of Fremy being suspected. But at the same time, Fremy's protector would be gone. The death of the seventh really would put Tgurneu in a tight spot.

The three-winged fiend was indeed uneasy about entrusting everything to this insider, but that was what Tgurneu believed to be best. And that was not the three-winged fiend's greatest concern. "I am also uneasy about whether the seventh really can protect Fremy... But what concerns me most is..." The three-winged fiend hesitated. "...is if the seventh really *will* protect her."

Tgurneu looked at the three-winged fiend with a little disappointment.

As Tgurneu's body, it had seen its master choose the seventh—and the chosen wasn't aware of this or the mission. As far as Tgurneu's Brave knew, the only reason to come to the Howling Vilelands was to defeat Tgurneu and the Evil God.

So wouldn't the seventh abandon Fremy, prioritize defeating the Evil God and saving humanity over protecting her? If so, then wouldn't that void the point of sending in a seventh? That was the thing that worried the three-winged fiend the most. "Why didn't you tell the seventh the mission?" the three-winged fiend asked. "With your power, you would have been able to gain complete control of the seventh's mind and given orders to guard Fremy. Your insider could have worked together with our forces to prevent Fremy's death. Why didn't you? That way would have been far more certain to keep her safe."

"I just answered that question, didn't I?" Tgurneu smiled. "Listen. I believe in the power of love."

"...Love?"

The three-winged fiend knew what Tgurneu's ability was, the one it kept secret from nearly all others.

It wasn't at all powerful. It took time to activate, and Tgurneu could only control one human at a time. It couldn't use this on other fiends, and it would

only be effective on a limited number of humans. Some might even call it a trivial ability.

But Tgurneu believed this power was, without a doubt, the strongest in all of history.

It could control human minds.

It could manipulate human love.

Tgurneu's ability forced his target to love someone, and it could decide freely who that someone was. One under its influence would feel exhilarated when they saw their beloved's smile, and the sadness of their love would bring them sorrow. They would fear their beloved's death more than their own, and if anything threatened their beloved, they would face it with all their strength. The more danger their darling was in, the stronger that manipulated love would become. They would become unable to think about anything but the life of the one they cherished, and if that person was on the brink of death, they would probably even lose their mind.

Tgurneu had used that ability to control the Saint of the Single Flower, forcing her to love and make her open up her barrier. It had asked her about the events of the past, stolen her remaining power and acquired the seventh crest.

And now, it was using its ability to control the seventh.

"If I made the seventh love me, as you say, it would indeed be possible to ensure my orders would be obeyed. We would also likely be able to coordinate and entrap the Braves. Perhaps it would have been easy to guarantee Fremy's protection, too," Tgurneu spat. "But you know, I don't believe in such impertinent ploys. I believe far more deeply in the power of love than I believe in the petty cunning someone such as myself could scrape together."

"..."

"The most important thing is how Fremy feels. Hurt as she is and driven by revenge, what will she do? The answer is obvious. She will try to kill me, with no regard for her own life. When she finds out what the Black Barrenbloom really is and when she realizes she was being used, what will she do? The answer is obvious. She will attempt to kill herself. If that happens, it's all hopeless. I

wouldn't be able to do a thing. Since we're in the position of trying to kill one another, I could never stop her from killing herself.

"But if something were to prevent her despair, then my victory would be certain—and why? Because love brings about miracles."

There was no doubt at all in Tgurneu's voice. "Fremy's heart cannot be moved with lies. If I ordered the seventh to pretend to love Fremy, she would surely think nothing of it. The only thing that can change her heart is one who will love her sincerely—because she hates false love most of all, and wants *real* love more than anything. The love has to be real, or there's no point. False love could never cause miracles."

"..."

"Love is wonderful. Only love can cause miracles. I've seen its wonders many times with my own eyes. No matter what dire circumstances befall her, I'm certain of my victory. The seventh cares for her, and that love is sure to cause a miracle and save her.

"I believe in love. There's nothing else worth believing in. In this world filled with lies, only love, *only* love is certain."

Then Tgurneu listened intently, as if it was waiting for a certain somebody's arrival. "I believe that boy I chose is sure to safeguard Fremy for me. I believe he will manifest the sort of miracles that only love can—because the boy I chose is the strongest man in the world."

The face of the seventh rose in the three-winged fiend's mind. It had doubted that second-rate warrior was worthy of being a Brave. But that boy who called himself the strongest man in the world had no doubts about that at all.

Adlet Mayer appeared in its mind.

"I'm certain Fremy has stolen his heart," Tgurneu continued. "He'll be desperately trying to protect her right about now. You don't need to worry about what Dozzu's faction might get up to. There is no way the strongest man in the world will let Dozzu's lot beat him.

"I wonder if Fremy has opened her heart to him yet? Or perhaps she still can't trust him. Well, she'll accept his feelings eventually. Even now, in her heart of

hearts, she wishes for someone to love her. That's what she wants more than anything." The fig's mouth was curved in a broad smile. "Hey, don't you think it's amazing?"

"...Whät is?"

"When she finds out the one who loved her from the bottom of his heart, the only one she thought she could trust, was under my control, how will she react, do you think? After all those betrayals, she still wanted love, so when she finds out the affection she's found now is nothing more than a part of my plot, what do you think she will do?" Tgurneu went on gleefully. "I'm sure she will kill herself. She'll show me the most wonderful expression, the likes of which I'll never see again—and Adlet will be the one to drive her to suicide. She'll show me the ultimate despair I long for!

"And that's not all. I just know Adlet will show me the greatest expressions, too. When he finds out that his own love, his own commitment to wagering his life for her was planted there by me, I wonder what I'll see?! Oh, I can't even imagine it! I want to see it so badly, I can't wait! What are you giving me that dazed look for? Don't you think they'll give us a spectacular show?!"

"...Um." The three-winged fiend hesitated to speak.

"...Oh, I see, you don't have much interest in this sort of thing. I'm sorry." Tgurneu apparently realized it had gotten too worked up, as it moved its vines in a shrugging motion. It seemed a little disheartened. "Well, we won't be able to see those expressions now. It'll be a little later on."

Evidently tired of talking, Tgurneu opened the book that lay on the table. As it did some reading to stave off boredom, the three-winged fiend patiently awaited the arrival of the Braves of the Six Flowers.

"It's mysterious. Love is truly, truly mysterious," muttered Tgurneu.

A small amount of time passed. After some trivial chat about the book, suddenly, Tgurneu said, "Once, the Evil God was defeated because of the Saint of the Single Flower's love."

The three-winged fiend digested Tgurneu's body in one gulp, submitting its body to its commander. In place of the fig body, the three-winged fiend began

to speak. “We lost to the Braves of the Six Flowers twice, because of the power of love supporting them. But our third battle will be different. You third Braves of the Six Flowers: You will be defeated by love.”

The three-winged fiend could hear the footsteps that heralded the Braves’s arrival in the Howling Vilelands. As its body moved apart from its will, it thought, *This is going to be a long battle*. It would probably not come to witness the finale of that battle, either. But one thing was certain: As long as the two warriors whose lives Tgurneu controlled, Fremy Speeddraw and Adlet Mayer, were alive, the only direction they were headed was into hell.

“What happened with Chamo and Hans?” Adlet asked.

Mora shook her head. “They’ve already left the mountain. They’ve gone beyond the range of my powers.”

“If Hans is the seventh, then I’m worried about Chamo. Shouldn’t we take her back?” suggested Dozzu.

But Adlet thought it was too late now. “Let’s leave Chamo for now. She’s not gonna die that easy. More importantly, Tgurneu,” said Adlet. He didn’t need Mora’s clairvoyance to see a large army was coming. They had to slip through that army with the fighters they had now and take out Tgurneu.

He would come up with the plan himself. They had to defeat it now, or the Braves of the Six Flowers were over, and he wouldn’t be able to keep Fremy safe.

But Adlet hadn’t forgotten to be on guard for other enemies, either.

Hans could attack them again and kill Fremy. Adlet figured Chamo was bound to do something, too. Dozzu and Nashetania could be plotting anything, and then there was Cargikk. Goldof didn’t trust Adlet. And Mora and Rolonia could change their minds in some fashion or another.

There were still many threats to Fremy’s life out there.

Adlet would eliminate every single one. He had made up his mind. He’d probably have to kill Hans. If it was impossible to convince Chamo, he’d have no choice but to kill her, too. He’d kill Dozzu, Nashetania, all of them, if they intended to do harm to Fremy.

Even if that meant his own death.

Even if that meant the world would be destroyed.

As long as Fremy was alive, he didn't need anything else.

Under the night stars, Adlet happened to wonder if perhaps such conviction was strange. Which should he value more—the world or Fremy? Which had he felt was more important in the first place?

Was he really in his right mind?

These thoughts crossed his mind and quickly disappeared. He was perfectly sane. There was nothing odd here. Fremy was the only important thing, and there was nothing else but her. Besides, he was still capable of wondering if he might be crazy, and if he'd actually lost his mind, he wouldn't be doubting himself. In other words, he was in his right mind, so there were no issues with his course of action.

He would kill everyone who hurt Fremy. That was all he had to do.

Epilogue
The
Runaways

Epilogue

The Runaways

“...What do we do now, catboy?” Chamo said uneasily as they raced down the slope.

Adlet and the others were already far away, and Hans and Chamo were alone.

“Adlet’s tricked them all. Chamo can’t believe it. Fremy and Auntie and the moo-head make sense, ’cause they’re dumb. But even the princess went with them.” There was still no sign of any fiends around, but it was unknown how long the pair could avoid them. “At this rate, they’ll all die. And even if we’re strong, with just the two of us...”

Hans didn’t reply. As they ran, he continued mull over the facts. “So that was it,” he suddenly muttered. “So this was the source of the misunderstandin’. All along, Adlet...never believed he was the seventh. I was right for checkin’ that back in the Phantasmal Barrier. *Meow* , guess I should’ve trusted my initial hunch. So that means even then Tgurneu was sure Adlet’d protect Fremy... So then, in other words, Tgurneu...?”

“What’re you thinking, catboy?” Chamo asked anxiously.

Running ahead of her, Hans turned around and said, “*Meow* , Chamo, do ya think I lost?”

Chamo had no words.

“Well, no doubt. But ya neow, Adlet’s weak on the endgame. He couldn’t forge any proof that I’m the seventh. That’s goin’ to take him down in the end. He couldn’t convince you or Goldof. And most of all...” Hans smirked. “He couldn’t kill me.”

Chamo couldn’t be quite as calm as Hans. “But what do we do? At this rate, they’ll—”

“Don’t ya worry. I’ve got an idea,” Hans said with conviction. “Tgurneu’s pulled one hell of a meowve. Frankly, I never imagined anythin’ like it. It’s an illogical an’ dangerous plan. Even now that I’ve picked it apart, I still don’t get

what it means. And that's exactly what's given it a weakness."

Chamo continued to listen silently to Hans.

"*Meow* , get yerself ready, Chamo. This'll be a bit of a rough fight. But with you and me, we've got a chance at turning this ameownd. I've come up with a way to take Tgurneu's plot down. If I'm wrong, though, we're probably done for real." Hans was smiling in genuine glee. "That's right, *meow*. This is a real fight. This is what I became a goddamn Brave for."

Chamo smiled and squeezed Hans's hand. "I dunno what you're gonna do, but it'll be okay. Chamo's here. Chamo'll protect you, the world, and all those idiots, too. Everyone. Though Fremy's probably gonna die."

Hans nodded.

That was when the slave-fiends deployed around them reacted to something. Hans drew his swords while Chamo vomited up her remaining slave-fiends. Tgurneu's followers had discovered them.

The two faced the enemy, guarding each other's backs.

When Tgurneu heard the report that the Six Braves had been discovered, it quietly stood in its wolf body.

"Now, everyone, the time for the end has come. My plans are coming to fruition. The death of the Braves of the Six Flowers is just a matter of time now, and all that's left to decide is how to reap them. Which will kill them all first: my plans or your powers?" With a smile, Tgurneu announced, "Come, and let us begin the competition."

At that cry, the fiends under its command flowed toward the mountain all at once.



It's been a long time. This is Ishio Yamagata. I'm very sorry for taking so long. Have you enjoyed Volume 5 of *Rokka: Braves of the Six Flowers* ?

A little while ago, I fell on the street and dislocated my arm. I've recovered now. I'm thinking about installing a carpet on my apartment floor. I can't find one that's cheap and convenient, and I'm having a hard time. I've gotten quite a lot better at karaoke. When you go alone, you get better fast. My habit of talking to myself when I'm walking alone has gotten worse lately.

That's it for my life report.

And the acknowledgments: To my illustrator, Miyagi-san, thank you so very much for all the help you've given me on this book, too. And to my editor, T-shi, and everyone in the editing department, I'm honestly so thankful for all the help you've given me.

And to all my readers, let's meet in the next volume. See you.

ISHIO YAMAGATA

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